

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: BEING THROUGH BOOKS: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
CONSTRUCTING A SENSE OF SELF
THROUGH FICTION

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Fiction provides us with diverse frames of reference and knowledge through which we make meaning of events in our lives and deepen our understanding of our own lived worlds. Using Max van Manen's methodology for phenomenological research, this study explores the lived experience of creating a sense of self through reading fiction. Through hermeneutic analysis of text developed from conversations with and written reflections from committed readers who identify fictional narrative as a major influence upon their lives, I address what it means to become ourselves through books.

Fiction brings us across worlds, moves us across stages and states of being, allows us to see ourselves in mirrors and across to others through windows. Participants articulate the importance of fiction in troubling their given notions of the world, providing gateways to wider worlds and role models for new identities, and helping them to make meaning of their lives and lifeworlds. They describe dwelling

at multiple thresholds, liminal spaces between quotidian reality and fictional worlds, and how negotiating those worlds brings them to self-knowledge, self-reflection, and their authentic selves. These six women, voracious readers for a range of decades, portray reading as an engagement with imagination that uncovers the hidden, transporting them from being out-of-place into multiple rich and supportive lifeworlds.

The ultimate product of the self revealed through fiction is the essence of our being—that core of self expressed by the concept of *Da-sein* (Heidegger, 1953/1996), which carries the notion of “being there.” As we story ourselves into sentience, we enplace ourselves within our own lifeworlds, recognizing our own core of being, and creating the narrative that becomes a lifelong discourse and ongoing journey, our own *currere*. Understanding the experience of self-creation through fiction opens up pedagogical engagements that recognize students as beings who engage in self-reflection through narrative, and connects the power of narrative to support their being-in-the-world. Taking advantage of the quality of “across-ness” in liminal spaces, teachers can become participants in the self-storying of students, and partners in their self-construction, leading to transformation that represents real education, not just schooling.

BEING THROUGH BOOKS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
CONSTRUCTING A SENSE OF SELF THROUGH FICTION

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Dedication

In memory of Dr. Donald W. Deering, who first encouraged me
to pursue a doctoral degree.

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CHAPTER ONE: SELF AND STORIES

Once upon a time there was a little girl who loved stories. She listened to her mommy reading tales of Pooh and Piglet, and to her daddy, who read about wine-dark seas and bold Achilles. She went to school and quickly discovered a magical way to have stories for herself—she could read! She devoured book after book after book. She went to the library every week with her mother and brother and sisters. She read all the books in the children's section, and the librarian allowed her to borrow books from the adults' section even though the rules said she was too young.

She read all the time. She fought with her mother and grandmother, who thought she should be doing chores or playing outside, when she only wanted to read. Her teachers allowed her to read when she finished assignments ahead of the rest of the class. She read long into the night. She read early in the morning, before the sun rose.

She became the Poor Little Match Girl, and she became the Princess Sara. She became Jim Hawkins, adventuring with Long John Silver. She became Mole and Mr. Toad, and Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm. She became Jo March and the dancer who wore the Red Shoes. In time, she became herself. (McShane, 2007)

Reading and the Self

We define ourselves through the choices we make in our daily lives—in work, school, family, and recreational situations. We make choices that fit our visions of the world and of ourselves. Where do we find the principles to guide us in these choices? We look to our own previous experiences, to the experience and advice of family, friends, and teachers, to the advice of those we perceive as experts, to self-help books and other nonfiction sources. We look to our religious institutions and cultural customs. We also look to literature—to poetry, to plays, and to fiction.

Fiction has provided me with diverse frames of reference and a vast source of knowledge. I am the person I've become not only because of my direct experiences, but also because of what I have read. I make meaning of events in my life through what I've learned from books, and deepen my understanding of my own lived world by entering

that of fictional characters. Fiction has been an important element of how I've discovered my own sense of my self. "Self," originating from the Old English *seolf* and *sylf*, can be defined as "one's own person, not another, same" (Barnhart, 1988, p. 961). Fiction is a conduit for discovering how we are both other and same, leading to a synthesis that allows us to become our own persons. The self revealed through fiction is often a product of the interplay between oneself and others; yet, its ultimate product is the true essence of our being—that core of self expressed by the concept of *Da-sein* (Heidegger, 1953/1996), which carries the notion of "being there." In books, we are "there," but the "there" is somewhat different, a world-at-hand that is both internal and external, and one that informs and influences the way we make meaning of our own notions of ourselves and the way we comprehend our own being. "The attestation is to give us to understand an authentic *potentiality-of-being-one's self*. With the expression 'self,' we answered the question of the *who of Da-sein*. The selfhood of *Da-sein* was defined formally as a *way of existing*, that is, not as being objectively present" (Heidegger, p. 247). In experiencing fiction, we may be perceived as not being objectively present, but we are present nonetheless. This presence is another way of existing, within worlds-at-hand that open to us through the written word.

The self I wish to explore, the self developed through engagement with fictional narrative, is one approaching the Authentic Self as identified by Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1953/1996), a self that has reflected upon its own place in the world. This self is one connected to the larger concept of Being, through its own reflection upon itself. "Being is the absolute self-thinking of thinking" (Heidegger, 1957/1969, p. 43). In encountering fiction, we do not only think, but also experience our connections to Being

in multiple ways. Our reflections upon these experiences are absorbed into our own self-thinking, as we bring our authentic selves into being.

Our fictional experiences mold us just as our experiences in the “real” world do, stirring our souls, leading us to think and feel, opening new horizons to us, and contributing to the creation of that “one” who undertakes the daily business of being-in-the-world and connects to overarching Being. Corey Anton notes, “Selfhood, as negotiated in immediate encounters with others, is fundamentally inseparable from the intentional compartments and material practices that are opened for self inscription” (2001, p. 69). Reading fiction constitutes a part of these encounters with others through the written word, and gives us material for such self-inscription. “I think, consciously or not, what we readers do each time we open a book is to set off on a search for authenticity” (Corrigan, 2005, p. xvi). We conduct this search for our authentic selves through engagement with words, with text.

...words can invoke the world and call it to life...a trust in your words will guide you in speaking aloud things you might not otherwise consider...words arranged in a pattern become meaningful and beautiful and lasting and belong not only to you but to all people in need of meaning and beauty and things that last. (D’Ambrosio, 1997, p. 34)

We call our own lived worlds to life through words and discover the worlds of others. We look for and create meaning; we search for beauty and find it. We forge connections to the universal.

Books offer life, distilled. They have the power to change minds and change moods.
Books are bridges. If you and I read the same book, we have common grounds, ideas and individuals we can discuss.
Books fill the empty space. They keep us company.
(Weston, 2001, p. 112)

In *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Gadamer (1977/1986) recognizes the power of imaginative engagement to open the world to us: “Aristotle is quite right: poetry makes the universal more visible than that faithful narration of facts and events which we call history can ever do” (p. 129). He acknowledges further, “For history only relates how things actually happened, whereas poetry tells us how things may happen and teaches us to recognize the universal in all human action and suffering” (p. 13). As human beings, we long for understanding as well as information. Fiction provides us with both. “We must never forget that we are beings who sing of existence” (Anton, 2001, p. 139). Fictional narrative allows us to create those songs, and to hear the songs that have been created by others. “The nature of art is poetry. The nature of poetry, in turn, is the founding of truth. We understand founding here in a triple sense: founding as bestowing, founding as grounding, and founding as beginning” (Heidegger, 1971/2001c, p. 72). The process of becoming ourselves through the fiction we read encompasses all these elements. We build a foundation for our being through the understanding that fiction bestows; we are grounded by the truth we find in fiction, and we begin our journey to our authentic selves. To open up the heart of that journey, I turn to phenomenology and the narrative rendering of experience.

The Power of Narrative

The power of narrative is a concept that emerges again and again in the study of phenomenology, which is the study of lived experience (van Manen, 2003). We constantly acknowledge that many kinds of narrative are important in the development of our selves. Often, we are discussing the capacity of autobiographical narrative to clarify one’s lived experiences and to make meaning of them, but we also recognize that

fictional narrative can provide the same sort of support to self-understanding and meaning-making. The stories move both ways—from our lived experiences to narrative that considers and explains them, and from narrative to our own understanding of ourselves and of our multiple lived worlds. “The strong poet constantly redescribes her past interactions with the world around her, constantly reinvents her self, so that she may act in the future with ever greater integrity and coherence. The strong poet plots her life story toward her own emergent ends and purposes” (Barone, 2000, p. 125). Fictional narrative has an important place in this plotting of our own lives. Just as we re-describe our own experiences and reinvent ourselves through these descriptions, we can also use the descriptions of other experiences to support that self-invention and reinvention. To shape our being, our experiences do not have to be direct experiences, but can be vicarious ones as well. Their fictional nature does not proscribe them from informing our future actions, nor from serving as plotting points for our own lives.

“The powerful allure of a format that invites the reader to join in solving a human problem, followed by an accumulation of meaning as the plot unfolds, and the relaxation of tension in a resolution of the central dilemma, is well known not only to aestheticians, but also to consumers of novels, dramas, short stories, biographies, and autobiographies” (Barone, 2000, p. 249). Barone recognizes that stories lead us to meaning through the unfolding of plots and the resolution of conflicts, at the same time providing us with insights into human nature and the ways in which humans interact. We do not “solve the problem” presented to us in a novel in the same way we arrive at a mathematical solution. Rather, we encounter the problems experienced by our fictional counterparts as the lenses (those mirrors and windows) through which we can arrive at our own conclusions and

integrate what we have learned from the fictional experience into the meanings within our own lives. In building our identities, we work through ways of naming our varied realities and lived worlds. Fiction gives us other names, other ways of naming, other worlds to name.

Just as the use of narrative and autobiography can be instrumental in self-discovery, fictional narrative can help us to define the world and our own places in it. Narratives can help us to become whole individuals. Max van Manen provides a summary of the power of story in examining how novels open other worlds to us:

Through a good novel, then, we are given the chance of living through an experience that provides us with the opportunity of gaining insight into certain aspects of the human condition. Put in more general terms, the significance of story for human science is that:

- (1) story provides us with *possible human experiences*;
- (2) story enables us to experience life situations, feelings, emotions, and events *that we would normally not experience*;
- (3) story allows us to broaden the horizons of our normal existential landscape by creating *possible worlds*;
- (4) story tends to appeal to us and involve us *in a personal way*;
- (5) story is an artistic device that lets us turn back to *life as lived*, whether fictional or real;
- (6) story evokes the quality of vividness in detailing unique and *particular aspects of a life* that could be my life or your life;
- (7) and yet, great novels or stories *transcend the particularity of their plots* and protagonists, etc., which makes them subject to thematic analysis and criticism. (2003, p. 70)

Narrative leads us into insights and understanding not only of others, but of ourselves. Through stories, we learn about how we can be and want to be in the world. Maxine Greene asserts, "...when we understand our lives we do so in narrative form, and clearly, our stories while different are nonetheless connected by the same need to make sense, to make meaning, to find a direction" (1995, p. 165). As we learn about the human condition through vicarious experiences, we use what we learn to make meaning within

our own lives. We use text to create that understanding, and engage with that text to become ourselves. “To understand a text is to come to understand oneself in a kind of dialogue” (Gadamer, 1967/1976, p. 57). We conduct the dialogue of fiction with several partners: with the author, with the characters, with others in our lives, and with ourselves. Such dialogue becomes part of our own process of becoming authentic, of defining who we are to our own satisfaction.

We use the power of narrative to develop that definition, calling upon the ability of narrative to bring experience into perspective, to shape it into something that can have meaning for us. Tim O’Brien asserts:

Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can’t remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story. (1990, p. 40)

Narrative allows us not only to understand where we have been, but where we are going, and provides a pathway for us to get there. Narrative can shape memories into meanings, can bridge memories and imagination, and can give us access to images and thoughts that allow us to continue our dialogue of becoming. Lynne Sharon Schwartz describes the ability of books to provide a path of self-discovery: “Words, though, could go on forever, linear, one opening the door to a dozen others, each new one nudging at another door, and so on to infinite mansions of meditation” (1996, p. 20).

Tom Barone acknowledges the power of fiction as a tool for human development, growth, and self-building when he notes:

As a reader, I did not yet grasp how good literature really works; how it urges us to place the minutiae of daily life in an imaginary context,

thereby estranging us from them; how it urges us out to a place just enough offshore to turn and recognize these phenomena as features of what the aesthetician Susanne Langer (1957) calls a *virtual world*, how this imaginary world then stands against, and comments upon, the familiar qualities of life-at-hand, allowing us to see them in a new light. (2000, p. 62)

The ability of our engagement with fiction to make things both familiar and strange at once allows us to experience life at one remove and, at the same time, to internalize the lessons we receive from these experiences. While we may be estranged from life's small details in fiction, our experience can still be vivid enough to move us to tears or laughter, to pull us into relationship with characters outside our daily experience, and to cast us upon new shores of understanding.

The word “fiction” derives from the Middle English *ficcioun*, invention, from the Old French *fiction*, from the Latin *fictiō*, a making, fashioning, from *fictus*, the past participle of *ingere*, to touch, form, mold (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1969, p. 488). Just as fiction may be molded or shaped by the author, how might we be shaped by fiction? How does it touch us in ways that we are not touched by writing more rooted in the “real” world? As Mary Aswell Doll notes, “Literature has a potential power, thus, to transform a world—not necessarily to change the world, but to grasp, more coherently the world within as well as without” (2000, p. xii). We fashion ourselves and our responses to the world in the ways we interact with fiction and our responses to the internal worlds it engenders. Schwartz speaks of turning to reading to discover responses to an overarching question, “How are we to spend our lives, anyway? That is the real question. We read to seek the answer, and the search itself—the task of a lifetime—becomes the answer” (1996, p. 13).

Maxine Greene (1995) provides extensive insight into this process as she writes about how fiction can be used to extend the reader's community by opening other worlds to the reader's sight and insight. She describes how fiction can awaken understanding: "An engagement with literature can summon to visibility experiences and perceptions never noted before . . ." (1995, p. 84). For Greene, this visibility leads to the comprehension that allows learners to situate themselves within an extended human community. "To open up our experience (and, yes, our curricula) to existential possibilities of multiple kinds is to extend and deepen what each of us thinks of when he or she speaks of a community" (1995, p. 161). Literature allows us to dwell within worlds that may be physically, culturally, and emotionally remote from our own everyday ones, and yet may engage us more fully than our daily routines. "In experiencing this semblance the reader lives vicariously in a virtual world, only temporarily bracketed off from the mundane, the nearby" (Barone, 2000, p. 139).

"The recognition that the work of art procures for us is always an expansion of that infinite process of making ourselves at home in the world which is the human lot" (Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 151). How does reading fiction become part of that infinite process? In what ways does it support our lifelong task of making meaning of our lives, of finding and defining our home in the world we find about us? The question I am called by is: **What is the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction?**

Mirrors and Windows

To use a metaphor I believe was coined for an early photographic exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, books (like photographs) can be both mirrors and windows. While reflecting our own experiences, they also can open our eyes to the experiences of

others, and often, especially, of those we perceive as “other.” Indeed, fiction can provide mirrors and windows at the same time, as it leads us to identify the lenses through which we see the world while expanding our understanding through the vision of others. We use these mirrors and windows to create our own home in the world and to make that world a more hospitable place. “If we really have had a genuine experience of art, then the world has become both brighter and less burdensome” (Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 26).

Fiction can confirm our identities as we encounter characters like ourselves, or can expand our awareness as we learn about characters unlike ourselves. According to Anna Quindlen, “All of reading is really only finding ways to name ourselves, and, perhaps, to name the others around us so that they will no longer seem like strangers” (1998, p. 21). We respond to characters’ dilemmas and actions in accordance with our shared human nature, appraising whether we would have behaved in the same way or would have chosen another path. Maureen Corrigan notes, “We read literature for a lot of reasons, but two of the most compelling ones are to get out of ourselves and our own life stories and—equally important—to find ourselves by understanding our own life stories more clearly in the context of others” (2005, p. 34).

In preliminary conversations, Emma, a scientist and former member of my book group, expresses the idea of boundaries and how fiction helps us to define our perceptions of our own boundaries. “... if it’s believable enough so that it could be real, and it could be you,... it’s teaching you something about boundaries, either yours or how somebody you know fits into the whole world.” She relates the intersections between boundaries to a Venn diagram, and comments that access to fictional worlds increases the

sets of boundaries available to us, placing us within the circles of a greater range of human experiences:

And I really think that somehow, from our reading—this Venn diagram that I am trying to tell you—we find out that we are valuable...even if we end up being in the fringe over here somewhere, we're still in the circle. And probably...we're really not in the fringe. We may be in the fringe of one circle, but there's another circle. (Emma)

For Emma, the ability to place herself within multiple circles allows her to see herself as someone deserving respect and understanding and to offer that same sort of understanding to others. For me, the intersection in the Venn diagram relates to the idea of encountering the horizons of others and discovering our own horizons, with such encounters deepening our understanding of multiple lived worlds. “Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other” (Gadamer, 1960/2002, p. 305). Becoming ourselves through reading, particularly reading fiction, involves an experience that evokes phenomenological processes.

Emma also notes that reading helped her to explore her own boundaries through the vicarious experience of other lives, revealing her own place in the world. She describes another sort of Venn diagram, where worlds of “fiction” and “reality” overlap, and how her own place is found within that space:

I tend to—I guess—put myself in the place of the characters, and think—is that what I would do? How would I deal with it? Or I might admire the person because I couldn't do whatever it is they're doing. And again, that tells you something about yourself. (Emma)

Gadamer speaks of defining "...the task of hermeneutics as the bridging of personal or historical distance between minds..." (1967/1976, p. 95). Fiction can bridge these distances as well. Corrigan cautions, "Among the many dangers of being an obsessive reader is that you tend to mediate your life through books, filter your experiences through plots, so that the boundary between fact and fiction becomes porous" (2005, p. 3). We pass back and forth, through the permeable membrane between the factual world and the fictional one, and use what we find in one to illuminate and make meaning of our experiences in the other. Both are lived worlds for us.

Schwartz comments on the way our reading permeates our lives: "It started—my reading, that is—innocently enough, and then it infiltrated. It didn't replace living; it infused it, till the two became inextricable, like molecules of hydrogen and oxygen in a bead of water" (1996, p. 24). Our reading informs our lives and our lives inform our reading. The way in which we integrate both into our own being-in-the-world contributes to our perceptions of who we are and who we can be. Barone also notes the interchange between fictional and "real" worlds. "Reality resides neither within an objective external world nor within the mind of the knower, but within dynamic transactions between the two" (2000, p. 168). This intersection is another example of the space within the overlap of the two circles, in which the self dwells. Our engagement with that overlap and with using that overlap to make meaning constitutes an important element of the way we come into being.

Corrigan provides additional insight into how fictional works can serve as windows, opening vistas to other worlds and allowing us to incorporate those worlds into our own:

I certainly don't think that we readers only or even chiefly enjoy or understand books whose main characters mirror us. In fact, the opportunity to become who we are decidedly not...is one of the greatest gifts reading offers. Women readers get to serve on that floating boy's club, the *Pequod*; male readers get to step into Elizabeth Bennet's shoes and teach Mr. Darcy the dance of humility; readers of either gender who are not African American get to crawl toward freedom alongside Toni Morrison's Sethe. One of the most magical and liberating things about literature is that it can transport us readers into worlds totally unlike our own. (2005, p. 70)

Fiction provides tremendously rich sources of vicarious experience, and people use these sources to understand themselves and the world in which they live (as well as worlds in which they don't live) with great enthusiasm every day. Fiction supports and enables our own coming to presence, our own be-coming. Through our fictional dwelling in a variety of worlds, we multiply the worlds-at-hand available to us, and expand the possibilities that we have for being in those worlds. The circles multiply and we find ourselves in the overlapping centers of new sets of Venn diagrams. Our fictional experience of being a woman dependent upon men's whims can interact with another imaginative lifeworld of adventure and physical challenge to provide us with insights into two very different ways of being. Such insight can influence our choices for incorporating these ways of being into our perception of our own essential being. We become conscious of a multiplicity of choices and create our own "there" in which to be.

Characters different from ourselves can open up our understanding of being by suggesting other ways of being and behaving, and by introducing the reader to how those other ways might feel. This insight can then be applied to our own lives; once we have a glimpse of another option, we can incorporate it into the choices we make for ourselves. My understanding of how Cathy and Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*

(1847/1959) can hold great passion for one another, and yet be totally unsuitable to making a life together, can help me to let go of a romantic attachment that brings me more pain than joy. In seeing the heartbreak they create for each other and themselves in not letting go of their attachment, I can recognize that such a renunciation can free me, and can make a better choice for myself. The understanding I develop in my fictional experience can lead me to a better decision in the everyday world.

Fiction can help us to heal our daily wounds in the same way it can inform our decisions. In picking up a favorite narrative, we can pass through our own loneliness and alienation in connecting with favorite characters and observing how they handle their own tribulations. Even a fictional happy ending can allow us to hope for a better outcome for ourselves. In enjoying the tales of transformations and misplaced love in Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* (1968), I can find peace in an ending that is perhaps not a happy one, but the right one. The acceptance displayed by the characters can speed my own resignation to what cannot be changed, and their continued lives after disappointment can inform my own ability to persist in spite of disillusionment. Corrigan describes how fiction made her feel less lonely as she made choices in her life:

Over the years that I was first reading those mysteries, I was trying to put together my adult identity without the transformative marker of marriage and also trying to figure out what kind of meaningful work I could do, what kind of relationships I could hope for. (2005, p. 115)

Just as Corrigan assembles an identity that allows her to be herself through the life she can imagine through fiction, we use fiction to envisage possibilities and to understand ourselves in the context of our lived world. Just as she does, we engage with questions of the work we choose, the relationships we want, and the

lives we envision. We undertake a journey into self-understanding through the fictional landscape that opens possibilities to us.

Fiction as a Means of Understanding Oneself

They ventured into the street, warmed by cappuccino and cannolis at the Peacock Café. The sleet and cold drove them back indoors just a few blocks away, and they escaped into the bookstore on Eighth Street. They wandered through the aisles and apart from one another. He perched on a ladder and thumbed through a new novel by Richard Fariña. Because the subway ride from her home to his was a long one, the pockets of his thrift-shop Army jacket were always distended by paperbacks. She knew of his constant need for more fodder and, after visiting the cashier, approached him with an offering. She handed him a plastic bag filled with Austen, Lawrence, Hardy, and Hesse. See what stories I've brought you, she urged him silently. Look at me, she said, see me. (McShane, 2007)

“But I also want to know more about myself. And I have always felt that when it comes to exploring the geography of my inner life, great books are my most effective guide” (Paterson, 1997, p. 204). The process of creating our sense of self is an ongoing one. “To be yourself is to be in process of creating a self, an identity” (Greene, 1995, p. 20). The process is internal and takes place in a realm that is not necessarily manifest in our physical world. “Literature has a potential power, thus, to transform a world—not necessarily to change the world but to grasp more coherently the world within as well as without” (Doll, 2000, p. xii). The lived space of reading is the lived space of our spirit and soul—in a sense, the realm of the invisible. “A work of art is a whole, self-sufficient world” (Gadamer, 1960/2002, p. 335). The interplay between the lived world of fiction and the lived world of our everyday experience becomes a space for exploration, not only of the outer world, but of our inner lifeworld.

Fiction can change the lives we lead in the “real” world as well as our imaginative world. I am aware of two regular practices in my life that derive from fictional sources.

Whenever I am driving and waiting to make a left turn, I turn my steering wheel slightly to the right. I do so because of a dreadful accident described in John Irving's *A Widow for One Year* (1998), where a car is pushed into oncoming traffic when it is hit in the rear, horribly exacerbating the original collision. Irving's vivid depiction of the carnage wrought and the grief caused by the accident was powerful enough to change my behavior permanently. This habit, springing from an imaginative leap into visualizing the consequences of turning the wheel left, has become a part of my driving conduct in the same way that I incorporate practices encouraged by my driving teachers.

Every week, I include in my grocery shopping some items for a food pantry that my church supports. I do so not because of the reminders in our weekly bulletins, but because of the opening of a John Grisham novel, *The Street Lawyer* (1998). A homeless man holds a group of wealthy lawyers hostage, demanding to know what they've done for the poor—not donations to the ballet or symphony, but direct assistance to those who need it. In a way that reading or hearing the Gospel of Matthew never did, reading about this fictional encounter led me to alter my behavior so that I could point to a concrete example if ever I were asked such a question. Once again, an encounter with a fictional world has engendered changes in my daily one because I have been able to imagine myself in a situation described in a book. The immediacy of the fictional account leads me to imagine not only the inner life of someone who would ask me about my giving, but to assess my own character in terms of how I respond to the injustices to which he calls attention. My experience prior to reading the book becomes transformed, and I enter into a new realm of experience, where my engagement with a fictional lifeworld affects who I am, how I see myself, and what I do about it.

Beginning the Journey in Childhood

“The trouble with us,” my sister once remarked, “is that we’re still hoping our father’s friend will show up with the diamond mines.” Just as the Cinderella story was castigated some years ago for cultivating unrealistic expectations in women, she cited Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *A Little Princess* (1905/1990) as a pernicious influence that engendered similar wishes for a happy ending within our family’s belief system. For me, however, *A Little Princess* provided a role model and a belief in maintaining one’s own identity in spite of attacks upon it. It was a book that affected me profoundly when I was a child, and one that continues to resonate for me to this day. For me, it is fiction that contributed enormously to my sense of self. It represents an early push to see myself as both a reader and a writer, as both a consumer and a creator of stories.

When we first meet the protagonist, Sara Crewe, she is a wealthy child about to be left in the care of a boarding school. Although excessively indulged, she is a grave, studious, and unspoiled child who champions the causes of others and is sensitive to their needs. Her most attractive quality, however, is her ability to tell stories, to hold her companions spellbound as she weaves tales. Her habit of pretending to be a princess is revealed, and she is nicknamed “Princess Sara,” partly in admiration and partly in jealous jest. I was delighted to make Sara’s acquaintance, and embraced her as a fellow-spirit, a living embodiment of qualities I wanted for myself.

Sara’s fortunes are abruptly reversed on her 11th birthday, when a report reaches the school that her father has died penniless after investing in some useless diamond mines. Miss Minchin, the school’s proprietor, instead of turning her out on the streets, recognizes that Sara can be very valuable to her as a servant. From a luxurious bedroom

and sitting room, Sara must move to a cold and dilapidated attic. Her sumptuous wardrobe is reduced to a few black garments that are old and too small for her. She runs errands in foul weather; she carries a heavy coal scuttle through rooms where she is no longer welcome. Miss Minchin takes advantage of her intelligence by having her oversee lessons for the youngest children. Throughout these drastic changes, Sara maintains her dignity and even, perhaps, her sanity by continuing her fantasy of being a princess. Eventually, she is found by a companion of her father's; the diamond mines turn out to be productive, and Sara is rescued from Miss Minchin. Once again, she is rich and indulged, but still mindful of the needs of others, particularly since she has experienced these needs more directly.

For me, *A Little Princess* was a tale of how imagination could allow us to triumph over adversity, a book that affirmed for me that the life of the imagination has value. Sara is a storyteller, and her ability to create a world within her own mind allows her to blunt the experiences of cold and hunger. Her whimsy permits her to make a companion of the one doll she insists on keeping, and to feel less alone when it seems that all her former friends have deserted her. Although all those around her see Sara as a ragged urchin, she envisions herself as a princess throughout her trials, and retains that core of her being successfully.

Fiction was, for me, an escape and an inspiration. I could be like Sara and hold onto my own idea of myself when I was being told that I was unacceptable. I could be a storyteller as well—I was the cousin who enlivened sleepovers with the scariest ghost stories, and the child on our block who could envision a pirate ship in the puddles by the curb. Just as Sara could turn an attic into a banquet hall, I could turn a crowded

apartment into the streets wandered by a tattered little match girl. Just as she could be the princess hidden from those who saw only a ragged servant, I could be the pirate queen invisible to those who saw only an awkward child who tangled the jump rope. Just as Sara could draw others to herself through a series of tales set in the realm of mermaids, I could capture other children's attention by narratives about the specters in our grandmother's attic and cellar, or persuade them to play out the scenarios I devised for characters remote in time and place.

Many avid readers testify that their love of books began in childhood. This was certainly the case for me; I embraced the world of reading as a lifeline. Anna Quindlen observes, "Reading became the pathway to the world, a world without geographic boundaries or even the steep risers of time" (1998, p. 19). She speaks of the book that illuminates a child's understanding. "Every reader, I suspect, has a book like this somewhere in his or her past, a book that seemed to hold within it, at that moment, all the secrets of life and love, all the mysteries of the universe" (1998, p. 32). Francis Spufford echoes this discovery:

And memory confirms it, for many of those who were eager readers as children remain eager-reading adults. We can remember readings that acted like transformations. There were times when a particular book, like a seed crystal, dropped into our minds when they were exactly ready for it, like a supersaturated solution, and suddenly we changed. Suddenly a thousand crystals of perception of our own formed, the original insight of the story ordering whole arrays of discoveries inside us, into winking accuracy. (2002, pp. 9-10)

Friends also confirm the power of fiction for the young. In preliminary conversations with book group members, their early experiences echo my own. Mike, another book group member, speaks of "disappearing into those books" and of inhabiting the Hundred Acre Wood of Pooh's world as a three-dimensional space. He notes that "I

really did feel like I was living in those worlds,” and, as an adult, regrets not being able to experience that inhabitation in the same deep and direct way. “The sense of transportation to another place—I miss that deeply.”

In the introduction to *The Most Wonderful Books* (Dorris & Buchwald, 1997), Michael Dorris describes the power, sensory memories, and opening of lifeworlds we find in our early encounters with reading:

Our contributors remember very distinctly the precise circumstances in which they discovered the power of reading, whether it was in their mothers’ laps, snuggled next to their father, having precisely the right book put into their hands by a never-to-be-forgotten teacher or librarian. They recall the color of that initial volume, its smell, its weight, its cover. They share a sense of its ability to transport: how, like a flying carpet, it lifted them out of their particular circumstances—mundane or painful—and into worlds previously unknown. (p. xiv)

We move from childhood through adolescence, through various stages of adulthood, on a continuing journey of self-definition. Books are our companions throughout this journey, providing us with mirrors that give us the strength and security to venture forward, and windows to worlds that entice us into venturing.

Continuing Self-Definition

The journey we take in using fiction to navigate through our lives continues through adolescence. Mike speaks of how the science fiction he read led him to his career as a scientist. He identified with the scientists, engineers, and inventors who were the protagonists of those works, and he experienced great power in being able to see “geeks” as heroes. “You get to try on a lot of selves.” For him, the works of Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, and Arthur C. Clarke were windows into the universe, offering him a place to be himself.

We define ourselves not only as readers, but as certain types of readers, and give others clues to who we are through the reading that we claim. We declare ourselves in our reading choices—as intellectually active and serious students of the world, as

sensitive observers of human nature, as humorous spectators of human foibles, as trend-setting hipsters attuned to the latest fashions in literature. Children today bond over their love for the Harry Potter books and create imaginative worlds together as they await the issue of the latest installment. In my adolescence, the exchange of books and reading recommendations opened us up to one another; my high-school sweetheart actually supplied me with carefully selected reading lists. Books were a kind of social capital, a form of currency, and the choices we made and shared became part of our exchange of identities and mutual exploration of one another's identities. We see a similar exchange in the sharing that happens in numerous book clubs that continue to meet and flourish in bookstores and libraries throughout the country. Propelled into new worlds by the latest selection, we process our reactions in conjunction with others, finding meaning not only through our own lenses of experiences, but through access to theirs as well.

Robert Coles (1989) provides many examples of how students turn to literature to understand their own personal narratives and to make meaning of events in their own lives. Literature can help us to find ways of coping with difficulties or challenges. He tells the story of a terminal patient who comes to terms with his own death through reading Tolstoy's stories, "The Death of Ivan Ilych" (1872/2003) and "Master and Man" (1895/2003). Coles describes a student who is able to confront his father's alcoholism through Tillie Olsen's story, "Hey, Sailor, What Ship?" (1956). Olsen's depiction of the interior life of an alcoholic helps him to understand some of what may be driving his father to behave in normally unacceptable ways. When the behavior becomes understandable, it becomes easier to forgive and, in some ways, to accept. Empathy in the fictional world provides understanding in the "real" one. "Through [books] we experience other times, other places, other lives. We manage to become much more than our own selves" (Quindlen, 1998, p. 69). Through experiencing other lives, we develop

understanding and make meaning in ways that we would find difficult without those insights that produce empathy for ways of being that we might not choose.

Coles also writes about how his students use fiction to confront moral dilemmas and to work out their own reactions to the world in which they find themselves. “We all remember in our own lives times when a book has become for us a signpost, a continuing presence in our lives” (1989, p. 68). Coles describes a student who becomes aware of how he fails to see others through his encounter with Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1947). His awakening to recognition of the marginalized leads him to examine his own flaws and the way he interacts with others. It prompts him to change the way he encounters a security guard he has previously ignored as merely part of the library scenery. He begins to see the guard as a human being and to treat him as one. He observes how the guard interacts with the stream of students passing through and begins to appreciate the guard’s gift for observing who might be ready for conversation and who would prefer to get through their security transaction with minimal contact. Because the book has opened his eyes, the student learns to honor the humanity of the guard; from this, he is led to think more deeply about the lives of a particularly invisible population—the homeless. We enter into world of the other vividly through the window of fiction; in doing so, we become more acutely aware of the world we pass through daily. “Imagined life is not merely a substitute for reality, but is itself experience of a kind” (Thomas, 1997, p. 256). Just as Coles’s student becomes more empathetic to homeless persons around him through reading and recognizing someone heretofore invisible to him, I have been moved through fiction to be more consistent in sharing on a regular basis with those who need to make use of a food pantry. Being brought to understanding of others invites us to act in changed ways.

How do we use fiction to develop empathy? What does fiction reveal to us about the “other” and, in turn, about ourselves? As David Linge points out in his introduction to

Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, "Collision with the other's horizons makes us aware of assumptions so deep-seated that they would otherwise remain unnoticed" (1976, p. xxi). These collisions can take place in the lived world of fiction as well as in our daily lived world, and can lead us to challenge those assumptions through which we navigate our everyday encounters.

Coles (1989) details more of the student's journey to awareness through his reading, as the student continues to visit Coles and to explore how the literature he reads for class engenders questions about his own life. He challenges Coles to teach literature in a different way. Instead of merely analyzing novels, he wants to learn about them in ways that appeal to his heart and to the hearts of other students. He wants the teaching he receives to trouble him as a human being. "Ben wanted *Jude the Obscure* and *Great Expectations* and *Middlemarch* to be taught in such a way that they were not only nineteenth-century classics but urgent commentaries on twentieth-century life" (1989, p. 80). Ben, it seems, would be in agreement with Mary Aswell Doll's (2000) notion that fiction can provide a path to wisdom. How do books touch not only our minds, but also our hearts? Can we receive not only wisdom, but emotional insights from fiction? Gadamer (1960/2002) notes, "Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the unity and integrity of the other" (p. 97). We are moved by the characters we encounter; we are touched by their situations, and we enter into relationship with them. The experience of reading becomes transmuted into an understanding of others, as well as self-understanding.

The influence of fiction can be damaging as well as benign. In "Teaching Young Girls to Be Girls: Young Adult Series Fiction," Julia Motes (1998) examines gender assumptions in several novels and finds the messages they send to be pernicious. Motes looks at several books from series fiction identified as the most popular by booksellers, such as the *Cheerleaders* and *Sweet Valley High* series. She is appalled by several

features that are consistent among the varied authors and series as to how they present the girls in their books, and by the messages she perceives that their intended audience of young girls will receive. To start with, she notes that physical descriptions of girls are abundant and extremely detailed, and often introduced before any plot elements. Appearance is apparently the most important trait by which a girl can define herself, as the girls in these books agonize over their own appearance and obsess about the appearance of others. The options for beauty are limited as well, with blue-eyed blondeness most valued and other races invisible. In addition, one must be very thin, and Motes particularly castigates these novels for the attitudes they introduce about food. Characters not only claim to be dieting constantly, but also consistently indulge in binge eating or other unhealthy food habits when they are in stressful situations. According to Motes, “The authors create a breeding ground for bulimia” (1998, p. 43).

The novels also portray relationships in distorted and unhealthy ways, promoting the idea that girls should define themselves by the boys they can attract, and that they are in direct competition with each other for these boys. The pursuit of boys is more important than academic achievement. Motes (1998) is concerned about the world views girls receive when they read these books, and she discusses how teachers can raise the critical awareness of young readers so they do not introject these ideas and attitudes unconsciously. What is it like to be the girl who is not described—of another race, not thin, not beautiful? How might fiction become a divisive element as well as one that opens our eyes to our common humanity? If we never encounter fiction that provides a mirror, are we likely to accept fiction that offers only windows?

Fiction as a Means of Understanding Others

The debris slid off the plate as she passed the dishrag over it. Her hands slick with detergent, moved the suds, directed the rinse water. She was elsewhere at the time.

Where shall I go today? she thought. A small town buried underwater beckoned.

Whom shall I visit? A young boy searching for a lost father called her name.

Who shall I become today? So many selves, so many choices.

In two worlds at once, sink and other, she contemplated the reading she had so little time to do. (McShane, 2007)

We use fiction to create meaning within our own lives, incorporating the ideas we receive and the emotions we experience to develop a fuller sense of who we are and what we are doing in our lived worlds. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), Azar Nafisi describes how her students use fiction to understand the totalitarian regime in which they live and to explore who they might be within its strictures, while connecting themselves to characters in the books they read together in secret. They imaginatively inhabit the traits of various characters within novels, learning independence from Henry James's creations of Catherine Sloper in *Washington Square* (1880/1998), or the eponymous *Daisy Miller* (1878/1986). They can imagine themselves as Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813/1995), and explore their own prejudices, which may prevent them from seeing the worth of others they encounter. The novels offer them models of behavior that open up alternatives to the constricted universe in which they find themselves, as women in a society that regards them as dangerous beings whose sexuality can ruin men through a careless glance.

Nafisi encourages her students to read in an organic way, to meld the lifeworlds of the novels with their own, telling her class:

A novel is not an allegory . . . It is the sensual experience of another world. If you don't enter that world, hold your breath with the characters and become involved with their destiny, you won't be able to empathize,

and empathy is at the heart of the novel. This is how you read a novel: you inhale the experience. (2003, p. 111)

We inhale the experience of a novel just as we breathe in our daily lives; it is an organic process even as it is an intellectual one. Moving deeply within the lifeworlds opened to us, we trouble our own assumptions and begin to question what we take for granted. Before Nafisi is hounded out of teaching, she presides over debates engendered by class readings, and portrays how many students view fiction through very specific lenses. One student in particular persists in seeing any female character who asserts any shred of independence as a threat to the proper Muslim relationship of women being obedient to men. Certainly, we view fiction through our own experiences and as products of our cultures. For me, this aspect of our reading brings up the question of bracketing—the need to acknowledge our own attachment to our particular experience and worldview and to recognize how they influence our thinking. How do we take into account these different lenses and the very different experiences two people can have when regarding the same piece of literature? Husserl provides a challenge:

And the whole trick consists in this—to give free rein to the seeing eye and to bracket the references which go beyond the “seeing” and are entangled with the seeing, along with the entities which are supposedly given and thought along with the “seeing,” and, finally, to bracket what is read into them in the accompanying reflections. (1964/1990, p. 50)

We must dig deep enough to identify our own frames of reference and discover what we take for granted in order to open our perception. We must reflect upon what we “see” in order to look through the windows that fiction gives us, opening into the lives of others.

Walking on Others’ Journeys

We respond to the actions of fictional characters in accordance with our shared human nature, judging whether we would have behaved in that way or would have chosen another path. Characters different from ourselves can open up our understanding of human nature by suggesting other ways of being and behaving and introducing the

reader to how those other ways might feel. For example, a present-day, white, middle-class woman might not face the horrific situations that Sethe, the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* faces, but she could perhaps relate as a mother to Sethe's wish for her children to lead a life better than hers. The connection that the reader makes to Sethe in this way could lead to her understanding more clearly the other challenges Sethe faces, and to incorporating Sethe's responses as possibilities for behavior into her own world view. Fiction provides tremendously rich sources of vicarious experience, and people use these sources to understand themselves and the world in which they live (as well as worlds in which they don't live) with great enthusiasm every day. "Books are the plane and the train, and the road. They are the destination and journey. They are home" (Quindlen, 1998, p. 70).

Coles (1989) demonstrates the power of literature in its ability to open alternative worlds to students. He speaks as a doctor of his own learning to listen to the narratives of patients through becoming attuned to stories in fiction, sensitized to searching for what his patients truly want to tell him. Through listening with more attentiveness and connecting with the personal narratives of patients, he is able to make better diagnoses, to consider more possibilities, and to treat his patients more effectively. Doll also speaks of the power of stories to jolt us out of one way of thinking and open up new worlds to us. "Story provides a place to react violently or sublimely, for it touches another world" (2000, p. 29).

Sue Monk Kidd (2005) writes about how books can engender empathy as she describes her encounter with someone who read her novel, *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002) reluctantly, at the urging of his wife. As a middle aged, privileged New Englander, he lacked interest in a world that seemed so different from his. He admits that reading the novel had been painful, but had opened his eyes to that other world. "Those characters got under my skin...I feel disposed now to the South, to black women and to white girls

who need their mothers” (p. 9) Monk Kidd acknowledges that this type of reaction is precisely one of the goals of her writing. “While, as a writer, I want to affect the reader’s mind—to educate and enlighten—what I wish for even more is to jolt the reader’s heart. I want my words to open a portal through which the reader may leave the self, migrate to some other human sky and return ‘disposed’ to otherness” (p. 9). What do we experience in such a migration, and how do we react when our hearts are so jolted? My own heart has been jolted by reading a passage about suicide in *The Dogs of Babel*.

Suicide is just a moment, Lexy told me. This is how she described it to me. For just a moment, it doesn’t matter that you’ve got people who love you and the sun is shining and there’s a movie coming out this weekend that you’ve been dying to see. It hits you all of a sudden that nothing is ever going to be okay, ever... you don’t know if today’s going to be the day...if you think about it too much, it’s probably not. But you dare yourself...you think, I could just do it. (Parkhurst, 2003, p. 78)

This passage brought tremendous clarity to my understanding of suicide, both as someone who had stood at the brink of making such a decision and someone who was mourning the suicide of a person who had been very dear to me. Through perceiving how small differences can lead to decisions (or non-decisions) with very dissimilar consequences, I was able to reconcile my own good fortune in being able to turn away from self-annihilation and to find compassion for someone who had caused me great pain when he was not able to turn away. I received a glimpse of another’s horizons, and understood his choice more deeply.

Re-cognizing Ourselves and Others

How does reading become a process of recognition and re-cognition? Gadamer notes that “Recognition means knowing something as that with which we are already acquainted” (1977/1986, p. 47). “It is part of the process of recognition that we see things in terms of what is permanent and essential in them, unencumbered by the contingent circumstances in which they were seen before and are seen again” (p. 99). The word

recognition combines the Latin prefix of *re*, meaning again or back, with the root of *cognōscere*, to come to know (Barnhart, 1988, p. 187). While we may be already acquainted with ourselves and what we believe we know of others, fiction allows us to look back, to take another look at those mirrors and windows. These second looks allow the reflection that brings us to deeper understanding, to changing our mind, perhaps, and beginning to identify what is permanent and essential. Fiction not only gives us insight into our being, but affects our ways of being in the world. We change our thoughts, our actions, and our ideas of ourselves through what we read and how we respond to it. We recognize self, other, and what those entities have in common, looking for essential elements that can draw us into relationship, not only with others, but also with ourselves.

Many of us still hope to be transformed by books and to use them to understand ourselves and others. We can observe that reading, rather than being supplanted entirely by other forms of communication, can be supported and enhanced by other media. The response to books being featured in discussions by television personalities such as Oprah Winfrey, where an endorsement can catapult a novel (or a novel disguised as a memoir) instantly onto best-seller lists, demonstrates that people continue to look to fiction to define themselves and to illuminate the world for them. Book discussion groups continue to be popular, and I believe this is so because they fill a need for life experienced through a metaphorical lens. In discussing a book, its characters, its symbols, its plot, etc., participants both reveal themselves to others in the group and learn from others, adding to their own views of the world.

I facilitated a workplace-based book group that met regularly for several years, and can confirm that the discussion sparked by works of fiction was enlightening and challenging for all of us, leading to personal growth through the interchange of ideas. We were always eager to share what we had learned and to find out what insights our colleagues had gathered. Although the group has dispersed because it became too

difficult to schedule when several of us moved to other workplaces, we still miss that interchange acutely, and reunite on occasion. For all of us, fiction continues to provide an important lens through which we view our lived worlds.

How do words have the power to create an imagined universe/lifeworld? What is its place in our “real” universe? What is it about a page filled with print that can transport us to another time, another place, another skin? I am interested in exploring this space and how it becomes part of our own becoming. And so, I continue with my question:

What is the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction?

Fiction and Pedagogy

She became stiff and remote as she refused to cry before him. She had been worried and insecure for some time now, as she felt him pulling away. She had withdrawn herself, seeking the protection of pretending she didn't care, that she was an island unto herself, who needed no one. Nevertheless, she had noticed that he saw her less often, that he was often not present even in her presence. She worried about his ease with other women, what they might have shared that did not include her. She wondered about her own inadequacies, what he wanted that she did not provide. Perhaps she was not pretty enough, not smart enough, not willing enough to be his vision rather than who she was.

*Their parting was awkward, as each chose to pretend that it wasn't really happening, that they would meet again soon, that they each had more important things to do just now. Nevertheless, when he walked away, she knew she was bereft. She spent some weeks mourning, exploring the whys and wherefores. She wept with friends and played mournful tunes. Time passed. One morning, when she was ready to do so, she picked up her copy of *The Last Unicorn*, for she knew its pages would bring her comfort, affirm her, once again. Her heart soothed by the narrative that embraced change and understanding of transformation, she returned to her own vision and remembered who she herself was. (McShane, 2007)*

Fiction is also an important element of our educational process, both in our formal schooling and in our self-conducted *currere*. If we define curriculum not only as what takes place in schools, but in the sense of *currere* as narrative inquiry into the ways we move into becoming ourselves, fiction assumes a role much greater than the narrow

literary analysis of texts. The concept of *currere*, as put forward by William Pinar (1978, 1995, 2004), encompasses the notion of the unending educational journey of an individual, experienced and reflected upon by that individual. “The study of *currere*, as the Latin infinitive suggests, involves the investigation of the nature of the individual experience of the public: of artifacts, actors, operation, of the educational journey or pilgrimage” (Pinar, p. 530). This journey does not take place only in the classroom, but in all the settings of our lives, including the lived worlds we enter through fiction.

Mary Aswell Doll argues for a curriculum that addresses the way we live in the world. “What can be more important than encouraging a real understanding of the relationships we form in life: relating to the self, relating to others, relating to the divine, and relating to the natural world?” (1995, pp. 31-32). If we understand *currere* to be a running of a course, as its Latin origin would define it, our educational experience encompasses much more than what we normally define as schooling. Education becomes a process of self-definition rather than an acquisition of information, and uses the strategy of narrative to conduct that self-definition. As we engage with fiction, the storying moves both ways; we take in the stories of others, and begin to create our own stories in the ways we incorporate and transform those stories into our own persona.

As Mary Aswell Doll points out, “. . . I insist that the engagement with fiction (prose drama, poetry, myth, fairy tale, dream) can be a learning experience of the first order . . .” (2000, p. xi). This engagement cannot be limited by the mechanical and technical orientation of learning about literature through identification of symbols, themes, motifs, etc. and the reduction of the fictional experience to summaries of plot and characters. “On the contrary, fiction—more than fact—teaches wisdoms about the human condition precisely because fiction connects readers with what courses within themselves” (Aswell Doll, 2000, p. xi). Observations about the capacity of fiction to illuminate truths about the human condition, and about the notion that fiction may be

“more true” than factual narrative, recur often when writers discuss fiction’s power. “A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (O’Brien, 1990, p. 89). That truth is the core that allows us to make meaning of what we experience. It is the essence of our *currere* and our connection with Being, and comes to us through story, both as we read and as we narrate. “By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down truths” (O’Brien, 1990, p. 179). While we may separate the structure of stories and objectify them in the telling, we also incorporate the truths that we discover through them.

Tom Barone recognizes that reading involves a reader’s interaction with the text in an engaged way to compose the experience, and that the resulting reality is neither wholly in the reader’s consciousness nor in the concrete object of the text. “Reality resides neither within an objective external world nor within the mind of the knower, but within dynamic transactions between the two” (2000, p. 168). Corey Anton asserts, “There seems to be, or at least there is said to be, a real world which is available to the senses, and also an imaginary world which is available only to one’s ‘subjective mind’” (2001, p. 45). However, he also acknowledges, “Humans, as embodied beings, are self-surpassing, transcending activities of Earth; they are sites of perpetual decompression into lived-through world-experience” (2001, p. 19). Those lived-through world-experiences do not necessarily have to come from the physical world; we live through experiences in the fictional world just as vividly.

According to Maxine Greene, “...when we understand our lives we do so in narrative form, and clearly, our stories while different are nonetheless connected by the same need to make sense, to make meaning, to find a direction” (1995, p. 165). The engagement of our imagination by fiction provides us with a way of examining our own lives and coming into being through that examination. “To imagine and to remember are

to hold in one's hands the 'intentional threads' by which a life comes to composition and compresence with itself" (Casey, 2004, p. xix).

Fiction as Sustenance

Our need to define ourselves as human beings requires a variety of nourishing sources, and fiction provides a rich vein of such sustenance. "One way to slow down, reflect, and feed the inner self is through engagement with fiction" (Doll, 2000, p. xvii). How do we make meaning, not only in our engagement with the text, but also in the way we incorporate what we read into our own sense of being? If we bring the text into being through our interaction with it, how does it, in turn, bring us into being? How do we participate in the shaping of our experience with fiction? "...the play of art is a mirror that through the centuries constantly arises anew, and in which we catch sight of ourselves in a way that is often unexpected or unfamiliar: what we are, what we might be, and what we are about" (Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 130).

One of the elements I explore in my research is how fiction can (and does) nurture us as human beings, how narratives can help us to become whole individuals. In *Nourishing Words* (1998), Wendy Atwell-Vasey writes about the tension between a pedagogy that allows for intersubjectivity and personal growth through literature, versus the demands of public schools for analytical approaches that support the types of high-stakes assessments currently in vogue. The teachers she studies want their students to engage with literature in ways that inform and enrich their own lives, but find that wish incompatible with the expectations of their institutions. They feel hemmed in by systemic curriculum decisions and handicapped by their inadequacy in conveying their own enthusiasm for reading to their students (although they all remember being bored by "school" reading even as they found compelling connections to literature in their private lives). They are unsure of how to engage students whose lifeworlds are so different from theirs, and how to find the keys to such engagement. I know that these were issues I

faced constantly in my own teaching, and was never able to resolve satisfactorily. While I had some successes, there were always students I felt unable to reach, and yet felt that I could if only I could discover the right book or the right way of introducing them to books. Atwell-Vasey makes a case for feminist pedagogy, supporting a way of learning that values the feminine rather than the patriarchal. She explores the role of mothers as givers of language, and how the relationships they develop with their children allow those children to develop their imaginative faculties. Her view is centered in the lived world and in the body. “The responsive teacher, therefore, provides pedagogies that require the student to maintain his or her immersion in the world of the text” (1998, p. 77).

Our imaginative engagement with text gives us insight into the worlds of others and our own lived worlds. Gadamer observes, “We saw that to understand a text always means to apply it to ourselves and to know that, even if it must be understood in different ways, it is still the same text presenting itself to us in these different ways” (1960/2002, p. 398). What do we each bring to the text? Where do we find the window of enhanced understanding because we are seeing that text through the eyes of another? Atwell-Vasey questions the assumptions about language learning and all types of learning that spring from patriarchal world views, and introduces a number of differing perspectives, even as she acknowledges the difficulties teachers encounter when they attempt to put such principles into practice. She challenges us to rethink such pedagogies, acknowledging both teachers and students as readers, writers, and human beings who interact with the outside world.

I found the teachers’ autobiographies in this book particularly resonant, recognizing again the power of narrative. One teacher makes a point I have always felt was true—that we can often learn more about a society from its novels than we can from history books. She speaks of understanding an entire culture through the works of Louisa May Alcott, and I can remember absorbing those same impressions from Alcott’s books.

I have always contended that I understand what I do about English life in the early nineteenth century because of Jane Austen. Perhaps it is because novels reflect the unconscious concerns of their times—in a sense without “thinking” about it—while history is often written in reflection, after the fact. Of course, the types of history we write are influenced by our own culture as well; authors never write in a vacuum. I think, however, the picture we get from novels is always going to be more vivid, due to their immediacy, their portrayal of ongoing human concerns. Novels reflect the tension between the universal and the particular, and often connect us to the universal through the specific. Van Manen acknowledges that “...the logic of story is precisely that story retrieves what is unique, particular, and irreplaceable” (2003, p. 152). Story brings us into the interstices—universal/particular, self/other, reality/fiction—and moves us through the boundaries of their interactions.

Fiction as Engagement

The question of how exploring, understanding, and making meaning through fiction relates to pedagogy is always an important one. For me, why we teach is always a central question. What is the purpose of education? Mary Aswell Doll, in discussing Toni Morrison’s work, offers this insight, “The question, she implies, should not be ‘What knowledge is of most worth?’ but ‘What ignorance has caused most harm?’” (2000, p. 25). Fiction has the power to move us from ignorance into understanding; how do we best make use of that power in educating our children? Maxine Greene provides a wealth of insights for these questions, arguing for the place of literature and other arts as central, not peripheral, to education. She acknowledges that what should be the greatest concerns of education are not part of current discourse, but that “the transactions between schools and the existing socioeconomic order have more to do with channeling than with opening opportunities” (1995, p. 51). We still struggle with the sorting function of schools, where schools so often function to preserve the status quo, and to provide

opportunities only for those in segments of society who already have many opportunities open to them because of their economic and cultural backgrounds. Education is still key to the discourse of power, and public education in the U.S. doesn't do a particularly good job of making that discourse, or that access to power, available to everyone. Can we change that discourse through recognizing fiction's power?

Greene argues for a pedagogy of empowerment; "...the pedagogies we devise ought to provoke a heightened sense of agency in those we teach, empower them to pursue their freedom and, perhaps, transform to some degree their lived worlds" (1995, p. 48). How do we use books to support our own empowerment and to find our own sense of agency? How have we been led by fiction to transform our own lived worlds? Greene recognizes the role of books and the imagination in creating our identities and our lived worlds. She calls on us to encounter the world consciously, through allowing our imagination to disclose what we may not ordinarily see and hear. She celebrates the value of pluralism in shaping our culture, contemplating "...an expanding community that takes shape when diverse people, speaking as who and not what they are, come together in both speech and action to constitute something in common among themselves" (1995, p. 155).

I believe that fiction can give us the "who" in addition to the "what" we might be. We come to new ideas, new understandings, new insights, new points of view, and we are enriched by glimpses into worlds outside our own experience. Fiction can educate us not only for the classroom, but for the *currere* of living our lives. Understanding the lived experience of forming, confirming, and evolving one's identity through fiction can allow educators to construct a broader view of sources for ideas and information by recognizing fiction as a legitimate arena for understanding oneself and others. This insight could lead teachers to explore alternative sources in their teaching and to appreciate that there can be as much illuminating information in a novel or short story as in a piece of nonfiction, including textbooks.

For example, the inclusion of fictional sources could enrich a student's understanding of history if contemporary fiction were to be included in the study of a particular time period or issue. I once developed a literature unit to be presented in conjunction with the study of American history, which focused on the evolution of work through the Industrial Revolution. The use of material such as stories and poetry written by the "mill girls" of Lowell, Louisa May Alcott's novel *Work* (1873/1977), and Sholem Asch's *East River* (1946), which contains a harrowing description of the Triangle Waist Factory fire, was designed to give students a clearer understanding of working conditions and contemporary attitudes and culture through portrayals by contemporary authors and the workers themselves.

Learning often takes place outside of the classroom. Identity formation is a lifelong task, and people continue to use fiction as a source of information throughout their lives (I know this is true for myself). What would it mean for the traditional venues of "education" to acknowledge that they are not exclusive pipelines for learning, or that they do not hold a monopoly on knowledge?

Wolfgang Iser (1978) describes the dyadic interaction between the reader and the text, and how reading informs and transforms our own experience. "Through the experience of the text, then, something happens to our own store of experience" (p. 132). Fiction adds to this experience by placing us in both the familiar and the unfamiliar, and we recreate our own being through engagement of what we think we already know with what we learn. "The new experience emerges from the restructuring of the one we have stored, and this restructuring is what gives the new experience its form" (p. 132). We enter the fictional lifeworld and come out of it altered. "Apprehension of a literary work comes about through the interaction between the reader's presence in the text and his habitual experiences, which are now a past orientation" (p. 133). In reading fiction, we engage continually in a dialogue, between ourselves and the characters we encounter,

between ourselves and the author, and between our lifeworlds and those of others. The product of those encounters becomes our own sense of self.

Fiction as a Dwelling-Place

Where does the world we create through books exist? At times, it can seem more real than our mundane world; yet, it doesn't seem to have a reality in any objective sense. We cannot touch it physically; yet, we carry with us our experience of the fictional world just as we carry memories and daydreams. I can summon up the face I envision for a particular character as clearly and easily in my mind's eye as I can recall the face of a friend. At the moment of imagining, neither one has a physical reality in my presence—yet the world tells me one is real and one is not. According to Atwell-Vasey, “We pay a high price for the splitting of response into two worlds, one that counts and one that does not, one that is poetic, spiritual, experiential and private, and one that is structured, coded, abstract, and public” (1998, p. 64). To insist upon the physical world as the only reality is to deny our imaginative ability and the riches it can bring to us. Van Manen observes the way that fiction can take us into other worlds:

For example, of the reading experience, we say of someone that she is “lost in a book.” But what does this expression reveal? Is the reader truly lost? While absorbed in a book a reader may lose her sense of time, place, body, etc....But in another sense, the reader who is lost in a story is not lost at all. We may be temporarily “absorbed” in a different world...but the reader lacks nothing, misses nothing, needs nothing; that is why the reading experience is so absorbing. (2003, p. 61)

The world we enter through fiction counts as well, and engages us deeply. We may be difficult to find in the everyday world, but we are intensely present in the fictional one.

Fiction often can be perceived as more real than everyday experience. Anna Quindlen asserts, “I lived within the covers of books and those books were more real to me than any other thing in my life” (1998, p. 4). She comments further, “and then there were books, a kind of parallel universe...in which I might be a newcomer but was never

really a stranger. My real, true world” (1998, p. 6). Jonathan Yardley writes about reading fiction for pleasure, focusing on “the storytelling process and the power it holds over the human imagination” (2001, p. C4). He discusses how fictional characters can seem more real than people we know, and how novelists engage the imagination of readers. “There is a direct communication between writer and reader in fiction that nonfiction only rarely achieves” (2001, p. C4). He acknowledges the special world and lived space of fiction. “The reader is drawn into that world—usually, in fact, the reader enters it eagerly, hoping to take up residence there for a while . . .” (2001, p. C4).

Fiction can tell us truth more effectively and with greater immediacy than nonfiction. “If we are to shed our illusions about reality, perhaps we might delve more deeply into the illusory world of literature to discover what is really real” (Doll, 2000, p. 83). Coles addresses fiction’s ability to engage the reader in lived worlds that are no less real than our physical existence:

Novels and stories are renderings of life; they can not only keep us company, but admonish us, point us in new directions, or give us the courage to stay a given course. They can offer us kinsmen, kinswomen, comrades, advisers—offer us other eyes through which we might see, other ears with which we might make soundings. (1989, pp. 159-160)

The depth of the worlds we enter through story is a subject that calls to me. I am captivated by fiction’s power to bring us into being and into Being. I am compelled by the notion of how channeling this power might bring us to a pedagogy that engages us wholly, one that offer us mirrors and windows to see ourselves and to understand others.

The Textual Engagement of Phenomenology

To explore the experience of using fiction to make meaning and to build a sense of identity, I have chosen an approach that involves “semiotic employment of the methods of phenomenology and hermeneutics” (van Manen, 2003, p. 1), in order to

identify the essence of this experience and to depict it in a way that draws us into it as deeply as novels draw us into their worlds. Methodological components guiding this inquiry are:

- (1) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
- (2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
- (3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
- (4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- (5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
- (6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (van Manen, 2003, pp. 30-31)

In subsequent chapters, I describe existential elements of reading to illustrate how reading pulls us into intensely experienced lifeworlds (Chapter Two). I discuss the philosophical grounding of exploring the experience of creating a sense of self through fiction to demonstrate that a phenomenological approach can be a useful and informative one (Chapter Three). As I engage in conversations with others who have found this experience to be meaningful, I analyze thematic elements with an orientation toward making meaning (Chapter Four). Finally, I address the pedagogical insights in Chapter Five that come from the exploration of this question: **What is the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction?** The next chapter opens up the phenomenon through the examination of a variety of sources that illuminate the lived experience of reading fiction.

CHAPTER TWO: THE EXISTENTIAL ELEMENTS OF READING

Max van Manen asserts, “All phenomenological human science research efforts are really explorations into the structure of the human lifeworld, the lived world as experienced in everyday situations and relations” (2003, p. 101). Exploration of the ways that fiction supports our development of identity can be enhanced by looking at the phenomenon through the existential elements van Manen identifies: lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relation. We can use these categories “belonging to the fundamental structure of the lifeworld” (van Manen, 2003, p. 102), to understand how fiction pulls us into different lifeworlds and enhances our sense of our own being and how we are in the world, as well as how we share those worlds with others. Reading encompasses every one of these existential elements in direct and meaningful ways, and engages us in the task of making meaning of our lifeworlds. We experience space and time in a different way, use all our senses as we dwell in fictional worlds, and enter into relationships that are negotiated through fiction-driven encounters with characters, authors, and one another. This chapter continues the exploration of creating a sense of self through reading fiction by identifying and unpacking existential elements of reading. These elements help us to look at how they bring us into multiple lived worlds and engage with our processes of making meaning that lead to self-creation.

The Lived Space and Time of Reading

The experience of reading takes place at multiple levels; fictional space and time intertwine to take us into vividly experienced lived worlds. As van Manen notes, “Lived space (spatiality) is felt space” (2003, p. 102) and “Lived time (temporality) is subjective

time as opposed to clock time or objective time” (2003, p. 104). When we enter fictional worlds, we fracture the space and time of our everyday environment and are absorbed into a different way of experiencing these dimensions. Nevertheless, we feel deeply the space we inhabit in fiction, and the time we spend in the fictional realm is certainly subjective. Where is our lifeworld when we read? What becomes our dwelling space? While we are present in the physical world and undergo sensory lived experiences of reading, we also inhabit a lived world of the imagination and of the soul. We become living bodies in an imagined world and bring what we have perceived in that world back into the “real” one. In reading, we enter a lived space that is not the world of our daily existence, but one which nevertheless influences who we are and who we become. Max van Manen’s comment on writing can serve equally well for a description of reading. “But phenomenologically it is probably just as plausible to say that the writer [reader] dwells in the space that the words open up” (2002, p. 2).

Heidegger (1971/2001a) writes that “To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell” (p. 145). He comments further, “...human being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth” (p. 147). While Heidegger casts dwelling as inhabitation of the physical world, he leaves space open for it to be more than physical presence. Our dwelling is not merely the space we take up physically, but the psychic space in which we invest our sense of being human and our personhood. “Dwell” derives from the Old English *dwellan*, to linger, to delay, to tarry, and is related to the Old High German *twellen*, which also carries a sense of hindering and delay (Barnhart, 1988, p. 308). We do not dwell by merely passing

through, but by remaining in a space for some time. When we dwell in the fictional lifeworld, the time we spend is not merely the time it takes for us to cast our eyes over the pages we consume, but the time it takes for us to absorb, ponder, and incorporate what we experience into our own daily lifeworld. As human beings, we search for meaning and clues about how to be human. In fiction, we find clues, meaning, and understanding by observing and participating in myriad ways of humans' being. We linger in the lifeworld we share with characters and authors; we dwell with them in the space we share through language.

Where are we when we read? I can be simultaneously in the world of the book and in the chair where I do much of my reading. I like to be comfortable and to have good light, and enjoy a favorite chair that has served me well for over a decade. Yet, while I can enjoy the sunlight that streams into my living room, I am not wholly in the physical place where I sit to read. My consciousness may be in Michael Chabon's Pittsburgh, Anne Tyler's Baltimore, or Edith Wharton's gilded-age New York. I am not bound by space and time, but can be present in whatever setting the author has chosen. I can inhabit a particular character or understand what drives several of them. When I am engaged with a novel, I am not in that chair, but in the world the author has brought into being through words.

Time also takes on a different dimension when we read. While only a few hours may pass in clock-time, I may live through several years of a Napoleonic war, several decades of Confederate widow's life, or one long afternoon and evening of a woman who is preparing for a special dinner party. While I live now in the 21st Century, I may pass

through any of the 20 that have elapsed in common time, any of those that preceded it, and any in a limitless future. Fiction brings us into possibilities for dwelling that are not limited by our current coordinates in time and space. Tom Barone comments that “Human beings do not view time as a series of isolated moments, each one disconnected from the other. Instead we tend to make sense of the moments of our lives by placing them within the context of all previous instants of awareness” (2000, p. 123). The fractured time of reading can be used to make sense of our own lives and provide that context and awareness. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (1996) provides insight into the almost oxymoronic quality of the way we experience time when we read:

Reading is an activity of the moment too; having read is no more palpable than yesterday’s feast. But unlike classic activities of the moment, dance or sports or sex—movement through phases—in reading, the body is still. Indeed what reading teaches, first and foremost, is how to sit still for long periods and confront time head-on. The dynamism is all inside, an exalted, spiritual exercise so utterly engaging that we forget time and mortality along with all of life’s lesser woes, and simply bask in the everlasting present. (pp. 115-116)

At once, we are still, but active. Our body in the “real” world may be at rest, but dynamic in the fictional lifeworld. We may be cowering in the apple barrel with Jim Hawkins, dancing with Mr. Darcy, or leaping off the Cliffs of Insanity with Wesley and Buttercup. We travel between these two worlds seamlessly, without needing to stir from our seat. What is the experience of shifting between lifeworlds?

In another example of the both/and quality (rather than either/or) of reading, Nancy Malone (2003) characterizes the shift between lifeworlds as a conversation undertaken in stillness that can move us to another state of being, and yet enhance our perception of our own being.

The words we read fix our attention. We pause over them and the thoughts they suggest, comparing them in unbroken silence with our own experience. Sometimes, as can happen in contemplative prayer, we're taken completely out of ourselves as we read, and return to ourselves refreshed. In any case, like our own interior conversation, what we read remains totally within us, all the while engaging us in conversation with another human mind, and thus subtly instructing, refining, giving form to the soliloquy that is our interiority. (p. 19)

Just as Schwartz sees reading as spiritual exercise, Malone compares it to contemplative prayer. Our spirits absorb our fictional experiences, to make use of them in our understanding of our own world. The refreshment of confirming or differing points of view allows us to hone our own understanding. Malone also touches upon the relationships we develop in reading, both with others and with ourselves, both conversation and soliloquy.

Inhabiting the Fictional Lifeworld

Readers often express the concept of inhabiting the novels they read. The writer Susan Straight acknowledges this power of fiction when she observes, "Only novels make us fully inhabit someone's life, someone's body and brain and soul" (2006, p. 15). From the Latin *inhabitare* through the Old French *enhabiter* (Barnhart, 1988, p. 528), the word implies a state of holding, of having, and of dwelling. Habit derives from the Latin noun *habitus* (Barnhart, 1988, p. 459), with meanings of condition, demeanor, and appearance, and the verb *habitare*, to have, to hold, or to possess. Cognates include the Gothic *gabei*, wealth, and the Old Icelandic *gaēfr*, generous.

How do we in-habit the lives we live through fiction? In what ways do our fictional experiences come to dwell within us, and in what manner do we dwell within

those other worlds? What do we come to possess through reading fiction, and how do we feel wealthy enough to share these possessions with others?

We hold onto our fictional experiences in the same way we possess our everyday lives. They become part of us, informing and formulating our outlook on life. We walk down the streets of fictional towns and cities and hear the sounds that surround the characters we encounter. We may pass through a polyglot flea market near a character's home, or be struck by the commerce-driven noise of a busy seaport. We may choke on the sulfur-ridden fog in Victorian London, or we may breathe in the salt of a Nantucket beach. We become part of characters' conversations, noting their distinctive voices. We shiver in the cold of a war-torn Russian winter or become enervated in the sweat-wringing African sun. We try on different costumes, luxuriating in a silk sari, wincing at the pain of bound feet, rebelling against the constriction of laced stays. The multiplicities of worlds that become available to us give us wealth, indeed, and we pass that wealth on to others, not only when we share the experience of reading, but when we interact with them in ways that have been affected by our reading.

Our fictional experiences influence our demeanor and our behavior. Through exposure to different ways of being, we create our own notions of how to be in the world. Will we endure incivility and exploitation with patience as Jane Eyre does, or will we cultivate the sauciness of an Elizabeth Bennet? We distinguish our own values through our encounters with the despotism of a Captain Ahab or the idealism of a Don Quixote. Our fictionally lived experiences become part of our habits, part of our core being. Emulating our chosen heroes can lead us to acts of compassion; laughing at the follies

and foibles of others can still compel us to recognize them in ourselves. While we chuckle at the social pretensions of E.F. Benson's Lucia, we sometimes have to acknowledge that we act in similar ways. A story about someone who leaves an abusive relationship, on the other hand, can give us the courage to move out of a dangerous situation ourselves. Just as I found solace in *A Little Princess* (Hodgson-Burnett, 1905/1990), Schwartz found that "Besides validating the life of the imagination, Sara was a lesson in how to confront the awesome and frustrating power of the adult world" (1996, p. 48). Sara taught both of us to control our anger, to refuse to kowtow to tyrants, to retain our own visions of ourselves. Schwartz goes on, "I have spent the rest of my life learning that loudness is not a show of strength, and that the spirit is kept alive by trust in the inner voice and by holding firmly to the unnamed thing that Sara found at age eleven: the stronger thing that makes you hold rage in" (1996, p. 50). Both of us found power in Sara's example, and strength within ourselves because of her. As readers, we hold onto what we learn and gain from books, and live our outward lives in ways that reflect what we've learned. We are in the world of the books and the world of the books is in us. We and the books in-habit one another.

The lived time and space of books can reflect our own personal environments. I particularly enjoy works that are set in places that I have known. A novel set in Boston or New York has a special flavor for me, especially if the author hasn't tried to disguise the settings. As the characters move through this landscape, I can picture where they are even more vividly. I know the sounds and smells and textures of the places they dwell. Reality and fiction interact—recollection enhances the imaginative act of experiencing the book

and heightens the experience of inhabiting it. Malone describes this phenomenon as “...an instance of that peculiar little pleasure we derive from stories set in locales we know...” (2003, p. 91). While fiction can give us vivid experiences of worlds we have not encountered, its power is enhanced when it brings us to one with which we are familiar. Recognition vibrates through us, and we return to known places. As Malone notes, “...here is a favorite instance of the long-acknowledged ‘joy of recognition’ that reading affords us. It is the joy of recognizing something about ourselves, or others, or life, that we have vaguely known but never ‘said’ to ourselves so clearly” (p. 98). Fiction mines a rich vein of imagery and metaphor to disclose our experience to ourselves and to enrich our perceptions of our own lifeworlds. We can appreciate the skill of the author in rendering identifiable landscapes populated with recollected characters. Our world is mirrored, but the new perspective rendered by the author’s viewpoint gives us a window onto it as well.

I read so that I can experience yet again, the miracle that happens when the paper, the ink, the book itself all seem to disappear, and I am journeying somewhere I have never been before on the wings of those magic words so carefully chosen by someone I will never know.
(Esbensen, 1997, p. 57)

Once again, language moves us into other places, other worlds. While we may not be personally acquainted with the author, we also move into relationship, sharing a newly constructed lifeworld with that person and those he or she has created.

Moving among Lifeworlds

A corollary question could be, where are we *not* when we read? In preliminary conversations with members of a book group I belonged to for several years, a theme

emerges of using books to escape, and using them for this purpose throughout our lives. “Books were wonderful worlds to disappear into,” says Mike when talking about reading as an adolescent. “I really did feel like I was living in those worlds.” Books allowed me to escape from a home where I felt threatened by my father’s temper and my mother’s passivity—to dwell in a place where children were more valued, such as that of Alcott’s *Little Women* (1869/1962), or where they overcame obstacles, as in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* (1837/1981). Books gave me friends with whom I was as comfortable as Pooh was with Piglet and enemies I could loathe as deeply as Captain Ahab did the white whale. Corrigan observes, “Sometimes we read books to escape the confines of the familiar, the here and now” (2005, p. 141). There are times when we need not to be in the daily world we confront, but in a more welcoming dwelling-place. In what ways do we find refuge in the lifeworlds of books?

The notion of escape is a recurring one when people speak about reading. The metaphoric origin of escape, coming from the idea of eluding a pursuer by getting out of one’s cape, from the Vulgar Latin *ex cappāre* (Barnhart, 1988, p. 342), gives us a sense of getting away, of shedding our quotidian lives just as we might shed a garment. The richly imagined universes we find in fiction give us lives we want rather than those we have. Maxine Greene observes that such imagined worlds can open up new possibilities to us “...if imagination is understood to involve a capacity to see new possibilities in things, to perceive alternative realities, to open windows in the actual and discover what might be” (1980/2001d, p. 30). Readers speak of escaping and entering worlds simultaneously—escaping the quotidian world and entering, dwelling in, inhabiting the

fictional one. Both worlds offer lived experiences that are instrumental in developing their sense of selfhood. Both worlds shape what we become as human beings and as participants in the various lived worlds we inhabit.

But if reading brought me closer to the people I loved, it also helped me separate from and gain solace against the people I feared and a life I was unhappy with...With a book in my hand, I was somewhere else, where extraordinary possibilities—and different lives— could be mine with just a turn of the page...I read voraciously through three years of high school, so enthralled I didn't hear the taunts or feel the scorn. People talk about virtual reality, but to me, reading is *actual* reality—a step across the threshold into a world as vivid and indelible as life itself. (Leavitt, 1997, pp. 140-141)

Leavitt gives us a cogent description of the way readers negotiate between lifeworlds, as well as of the strength of the fictional experience. Our dwelling in the vivid fictional lifeworld allows us to negotiate the difficulties of the quotidian one. "...reading continues to provide an escape from a crowded house into an imaginary room of one's own" (Quindlen, 1998, p. 31). When those difficulties become too much for us, we have an escape hatch. "And a book provides what it always has: a haven" (Quindlen, p. 31).

Reading also allows us to move out of our own daily ways of encountering the world through language, giving us a new range of communication. "Reading is escape—why not admit it?—but not from job or troubles. It is escape from the boundaries of our own voices and idioms" (Schwartz, 1996, pp. 111-112). Our own voices can join with those of others to create a new conversation that then can reshape our own thoughts. And yet, as David Michael Levin (1989) points out, "There is more to communication than language. There is more to language than its cognitive-instrumental content" (p. 195). He also asserts, "Communication requires more than the successful performance of speech-

acts; it requires, among other things, the capacity to be touched and moved by what one sees, and the capacity to listen carefully and with an open mind” (p. 102). The communication that occurs through books most assuredly has the capacity to touch and move us, and the escape it offers us from our own communicative limits is another element that becomes important in our becoming ourselves. Our horizons are altered and enlarged, and we become selves that are more varied, more sensitive, more complete.

In our preliminary conversation, Mike also speaks of losing himself within the worlds of books. “It’s just like living in that little world of Christopher Robin and Pooh. It was like a three-dimensional space.” For him, the maps of the Hundred Acre Wood and Middle Earth charted places he truly inhabited, which he describes as “deep worlds.” Like many others, he speaks of “disappearing” into the book. While the prefix *dis* denotes opposition, appear derives from the Latin *appārēre*, to come into sight, or come forth (Barnhart, 1988, p. 282). While we disappear from our daily lives, we simultaneously appear in another realm, that of the fictional worlds we enter.

About fiction read in adolescence, depicting the triumph of good over evil, Gina, another book group member, observes:

As I was not liking what was going on around me, or feeling very much out of place...not being comfortable with myself or with my friends...I remember what a comfort it was, what an escape...it was a hope. It was all fiction that I would read, but it kept me going with a real hope. (Gina)

For Gina, her dwelling in the fictional world carries over into her daily lived world, giving her coping mechanisms and an attitude of being able to overcome the challenges she perceives in her life through beliefs supported through fictional examples. A real hope springs from imagined possibilities. The interplay of lived

worlds becomes the space within which the reader dwells. What is our physical experience of this interplay?

The Lived Body of Reading

Reading fiction may appear to be a passive activity—we sit, lie, or loll somewhere and gaze at the pages before us. We crouch over a table and absent-mindedly bring food to our mouths as we turn pages. We may be oblivious to the street around us as we peek into a newly purchased book on our way home. In truth, however, engaging with fiction involves all our senses as well as our minds and our emotions. We are not merely decoding statements, descriptions, or conversations; we are decoding the world and making meaning of it. The experience may be negotiated through words on paper, but it changes us, influences us, and makes us ourselves just as our daily activities do. We encounter fiction as embodied beings engaged in acts of imaginative intentionality. Corey Anton's comments describe the power of fiction to engage us and speak to our being:

Many entities of “the there” are presented not merely through movement, touch, sight, hearing, smell, taste, or even affect. These objects, events, and persons, are made manifest and drawn near through imaginative intentionality; threads of imaginative intentionality offer their own manner of releasing and appropriating world-experience. (2001, p. 45)

We are carried into the worlds of the books through their sensory appeal, dwell in them with all our being, and are returned to our own world in a changed state. “While reading, my mind is not just thinking and feeling, but also sensing. It has touch and vision, taste and sound, all of which mediate between my own experiences and the author's invocations” (Spratt, 2001, p. 124). The power of narrative is its ability to engage our

senses on multiple levels, thereby conveying varied realities to us as embodied beings.

What does it mean to be sensually engaged when we read?

David Abram describes the linking of sensory experiences in reading as a type of synaesthesia.

For reading, as soon as we attend to its sensorial texture, discloses itself as a profoundly synaesthetic encounter. Our eyes converge upon a visible mark, or a series of marks, yet what they find there is a sequence not of images but of sounds, something heard; the visible letters...trade our eyes for our ears...a new linkage has been forged...(1996, p. 124)

The sensorial texture of fiction, however, engages not only sight and sound, but all of our senses, using them to create the experience of another lifeworld. We enter these worlds through seeing the words on a page. Once we are there, however, we dwell fully, with the complete range of our bodily ability to observe sight, sound, smell, taste, and texture. We engage with the fictional lifeworld with the totality of our being. “The more we are able to perceive, the wider and richer becomes the landscape on which our imagination and our feelings can work” (Greene, 1990/2001i, p. 81). We create the lifeworld of fiction in the same way we create our daily lives—through our senses. “Sensory powers and their intended objects are gifts by which world [and] self are spatialized and temporalized in particular lived-through configurations” (Anton, 2001, p. 41). We create the lived-through configurations of fiction in relationship with the author and the characters. “Reading, though usually a solitary act, is a conversation, a complex exchange between oneself and the author (Can I trust you?), the characters in the book (Oh, Anna Karenina, don’t be so foolish!), with oneself (I’ve felt that way)” (Malone, 2003, p. 125). What does it mean to be in conversation with the text? In what manner does the text transport us?

Mike describes the experience of reading as being “transported.” “I really did feel like I was living in those worlds, that physical sense of transportation to another place. We were just sort of transported away again into that...where the book is, where the action is taking place.” The Latin-derived prefix *trans*, across, combined with the Latin root of *portāre*, to carry (Barnhart, 1988, p. 1161), depicts that same sense of being carried away from our daily lives and into another place where we dwell imaginatively. “To enter a created world, an invented world, is to find new perspectives opening on our lived worlds, the often taken-for-granted realities of the everyday” (Greene, 1990/2001i, p. 82). We are moved out of our routine perceptions into new ones. Fiction appeals to the fullness of our being, to our bodies as well as our minds, as we travel across these realms and carry our own sense of being from one into the other.

I think we read because we can, and because it’s beautiful to leap through the double remove of words and print into another world. A person shovelling a walk can also be in nineteenth-century Paris or the Garden of Eden, or lit up with some radioactive image made by a poet seven hundred years ago. Anything said well is exhilarating, no matter what awful thing it is about. We read because we can see so much more behind our eyes.
(Nixon, 1997, p. 182)

As readers, we see the world of the book, hear its accents, smell its aromas, taste its flavors, and touch its textures. In what ways are our senses engaged when we read?

The Sight of Reading

The visual element of reading often exists on two levels—the physical page and the words upon it, and the world that the page may evoke. One of the most powerful qualities of the written word is its ability to create a world of the imagination. When we read fiction, we populate this world as we see fit. The setting and characters spring to life

in some portion of our mind/brain/soul and take on the life that we choose to give to them. Several of us may read the same book and carry a completely different image of the same characters or places in our minds, yet the description we have read is the same. As Gadamer discerns, “On the other hand, if a poet describes a house in his own words or evokes the idea of a house, we do not look in the direction of any particular house, but each of us constructs his own image of a house in such a way that it stands there for him as ‘the house’” (1977/1986, p. 112). Our freedom to visualize the house allows for our own interpretation of the author’s words. One of the great disappointments in seeing a favorite novel transferred to film can be how “wrong” the producers and director have been in their own interpretation. We carry our own image of what the author has conveyed, and judge derivative works according to how they reflect that particular image.

As children, we may be influenced by the illustrations in the early books we read. After being a fan of the book for some time, I was able to discover a copy of *A Little Princess* with the “right” illustrations—not the same one that I read the first time I encountered the book, but one I later found in the public library. The artist, Ethel Franklin Betts, captures Sara in a way that was much closer to my own vision of her (although it still isn’t the exact mind-picture I had developed), and truly portrays the mood of the book’s more poignant and difficult passages, where she loses her father and lives her isolated garret life. In these pictures, Sara’s dark hair frames her pale face; her wrists are thin and fragile; she is enveloped by her black frock. I could see myself in this Sara. The edition illustrated by Tasha Tudor just doesn’t have the emotional resonance that the

version by Betts possesses. And yet Tasha Tudor's illustrations are right for *The Secret Garden*. (And, of course, by "right," I mean "reflective of my personal vision.")

Would *Winnie the Pooh* (the original version, not the pathetic Disneyfied one) be the same without E.H. Shepard's illustrations? How do Dr. Seuss's fantastical drawings enhance our enjoyment of his verses? "Like all good art, honest stories are powerfully observed, carefully detailed. They must tend to generate in the reader awareness of the locations of (actual or fictitious) characters' thoughts, beliefs, desires, and habits, in the webs of contingencies that constitute their life-worlds" (Barone, 2000, p. 192). The visual details of reading conjure up the worlds we enter, and our mind's eye experiences them as another reality, another lived world.

Reading has compelled me to focus my vision. When I read a fine description from nature, for instance, I experience a complex delight. Yes, I say, that's it. That's what I have seen. But the description does more than that. It articulates, clarifies, illumines my vision, making me see better than I have before that fierce and fragile beauty of the world. (Malone, 2003, p. 163)

The descriptions authors offer to us both draw us into the fictional world and lead us to consider our daily world in new ways. We enter into the landscape inhabited by the characters. Is it urban or pastoral, affluent or squalid, orderly or chaotic, crowded or deserted? We meet the characters with whom we'll be interacting for the duration of our reading. What are the physical qualities that make them who they are? Are they young or old, strong or feeble, attractive or repellent? The choices made by the author create the setting of the imaginative lifeworld. We delineate its details through our own imaginative powers and our own vision.

The Sound of Reading

The reading I can recall before I could decode words on paper was the reading I heard from my parents. I can hear my mother's voice changing to become Eeyore's or Piglet's, and my father's baritone declaiming verses from the *Odyssey*. They introduced me to the world of stories—stories for children and stories that had been passed on through time. Perhaps there was some connection to oral tradition, storytelling—but the book was always an important part of the experience. The book was where the good stories resided, the gateway to the other worlds. My parents were transformed into storytellers, interpreters of the written word. What are the voices we hear when we read?

I still “hear” an internalized voice when I read, and even when I write. There is something I perceive that produces the words besides the letter images on the paper. The voice in my mind/imagination is neither male nor female. It is not a singing voice or an announcer's voice, but perhaps the voice of print. The fictional voice is slightly different from the nonfiction one. Even different newspapers or magazines “sound” somewhat different. Is this something that other readers observe, or is it a peculiarity of mine? The voice may be my way of engaging in conversation with the text, of giving it a voice that speaks to me.

I mostly like to read in silence, although I will play music if the reading is something that doesn't demand my full attention, like the Sunday paper. I definitely cannot do my reading for classes with the distraction of music; I've never adapted to working in an environment with music. If I do have something playing when I read, it is likely to be instrumental; perhaps there is too much competition if there are other words

that are claiming my attention. Some exceptions are songs that I have heard for many years, which are able to become background sound because they are so familiar. The voice of reading needs to come through with clarity; for me, that means I must not be occupied with other types of listening.

Reading also allows us to hear our own thoughts and feelings, just as entering a fictional lifeworld can focus our perspective of our daily one:

More deeply, if we are readers, literature, with its power to “get inside” us, to articulate our thoughts and feelings for us, affects our interiority. As we become intimate with the interiority of others in this privileged fashion, and if we are reflective, we may become more intimate with ourselves, “overhear” ourselves, and, however subtly, for better or for worse, depending on what we read, we may be changed. (Malone, 2003, p. 130)

Malone acknowledges that what we hear, or “overhear,” through the author’s voice can lead us to understanding both ourselves and others. We become familiar with interiorities other than our own; at the same time, such familiarity can bring us into deeper relationship with ourselves. The window through which we hear others speaking becomes a prism for our own inner dialogue, refracting our own sense of being and disclosing it to us in new ways.

We engage in dialogue with other human beings through speech, through language. Anton describes humans as sonorous beings and observes, “Sonorousness (i.e., speech [and] language) is an exemplar of our being-with-others-being-in-the world...Sonorousness is the bodily power which most clearly demonstrates the fact that we are social in our being” (2001, p. 87). We hear the conversation we conduct with authors and characters in silence, yet it has the same quality of engaging with them as beings, of being with them in the world in a concerned way. We need to hear what they

have to say, and to hear what we have to say in response. “My thoughts had shaped themselves aurally, through the sounds of the words” (Schwartz, 1996, p. 21). Our conversation in fiction serves to disclose and unpack our thoughts.

The worlds in books have vivid acoustic elements as well as visual ones. Cannons boom in battles; a young woman plays a pianoforte in a drawing room; children chant as they skip rope. The clinking of ice in glasses signals another John Cheever cocktail party. Each character has a distinguishing voice—could tart Elizabeth Bennet possibly sound the same as her sweet-natured sister Jane? An elderly character might quaver where a young hellion would shout. The Okie accents of Steinbeck characters contrast with the Oxford drawl of Lord Peter Wimsey. We hear them all in our imagination and they speak to us distinctively. “. . .I come to the end of *To Kill A Mockingbird* and hear the crack as Jem’s arm breaks as clear as I can hear the kitchen clock tick” (Quindlen, 1998, p. 57).

Being absorbed in a book can envelop us in a sort of “cone of silence” in relation to the outer world, placing us in the auditory landscape of the world we enter.

I envied my older sister her uninteruptability. While I looked up from my book when my name was called, she had the uncanny ability not to hear. I would test her as she read. It was like addressing a stone. . .My sister appeared to be present, but she was in the book. This is a great and useful gift. The stunned petitioner retreats, daunted by an invisible power that can drown out the world. (Schwartz, 1996, pp. 30-31)

I can attest personally to the type of absorption Schwartz describes. My family, however, never retreated, but persisted in demanding my attention until they broke through my consciousness and dragged me back to their world.

The conversation we engage in through reading is a lively and ongoing one, and we can start it every time we pick up a book. “And in good fiction I can observe the

characters asking—or failing to ask, or wrongly answering—the questions that make us authentic human beings, true selves, the questions that are the very stuff of our lives, and the very stuff of literature, both tragic and comic” (Malone, 2003, p. 32). What are the questions that reading engenders? I know that books have led me to ask many that relate to my own being. Who am I? Am I someone like this, or like that? Do I want to live this way, or another? We can hear these existential questions in fiction if we listen carefully; we can also hear the answers that allow us to become the selves we are meant to be.

The Scent of Reading

One of the things I recollect most clearly and can call up into my memory most easily about the young man I dated through high school is his particular scent—how he smelled when I was close to him. It was the scent of old books, and perhaps that was one of his attractions for me. It was the scent of second-hand bookstores, like the Strand, that abounded in New York. It was that somewhat musty but not unpleasant combination of paper and ink that has been allowed to mellow, that reflects a volume that has lived for a while and perhaps has passed through many hands. What are the associations we have with old books? Do we imagine the readers who have handled this volume before us, and add another imaginative layer to the one of encountering the book itself? The former owners of books we gather can be additional participants in the literary conversation.

New books can have a distinctive fragrance as well. Glossy paper and certain types of ink can interact in both pleasant and unpleasant ways. An inexpensive book can have the pungency of crude materials. There have been books I have been unable to read because I found the scent of them so disagreeable. Conversely, there are books I recall

buying in childhood, in particular a series of Louis May Alcott's work, for which I can still summon up the scent of the paper and ink, creating a fragrance of anticipation and the excitement of encountering a new (to me) story by a favorite author.

The scents of books can be tremendously evocative. When I worked in the Amazon area, I bought some books of poetry in Portuguese. These carry the moist and fecund aroma of the rain forest, even though years have passed since I added them to my collection; a single sniff brings me back to Brazil immediately. Anne Fadiman describes a similar experience. "Thus, a landscape architect I know savors the very smell of the dirt embedded in his botany texts; it is the alluvium of his life's work" (1998, p. 42).

Just as the books we read are full of sights and sounds, they are full of smells as well. We can be choked by the sulfur and pitch of a Nantucket whaling ship or refreshed by the sea breezes of Lyme Regis. We can perceive the metallic smell of blood on a battlefield or breathe in the competing bouquets of a country garden. Settings as varied as the magnolia and honeysuckle-scented American South, the piney woods of the Black Forest, or the heather-covered moors of Britain can become manifest to us through descriptions of their fragrances. What are the aromas of our imaginary landscape? Scent becomes an additional element in our sensory participation in the act of reading.

The Texture of Reading

The feeling of a book can also be distinctive. The pages can be inexpensive and rough, or smooth and cool. The book can be heavy in our hands, or as insubstantial as the little golden books our mothers bought us at the supermarket. The jacket cover can be a nuisance, slipping down as we read and getting crumpled as we push it out of our way.

Library books have their special plastic/cellophane wrappings and squeak when you run a finger across their covers. Bill Holm writes of the physical attributes of books:

But I love books also as they might be loved by an illiterate sensualist. I love the bit of lead type on heavy rag paper, the sexy swirls of marbled endpapers, the gleam and velvety smoothness of Morocco calf, the delicate India paper covering the heavy etching of the frontispiece, the grand heft of Gibbon or some collected works, the faint perfume of mildew in old English editions, the ghost smell of ink and the glue in bindings. I feel my books. I run my hands over them as over skin or fur. I stroke them and sniff them and admire them from various angles in various light. (1997, p. 105)

As a child, I was taught that books were to be respected; we didn't break their spines or turn them face-down to save our place. There were special books that required that we wash our hands before we handled them. I particularly remember a fine volume of masterpieces of Western Art, with excellent color plates, and an edition of the *Divine Comedy* that merited this sort of treatment. Writing anything but an inscription in a book was vandalism. It took me several years of graduate school before I was able to mark up my class texts with notes and highlights. This reverence changed somewhat with the advent of paperbacks. Books became something I could buy for myself rather than something provided by my parents. I did write notes in them on occasion, but with a sense of adolescent defiance.

Fadiman describes an incident reflective of such reverence for books from a childhood trip with her family.

At the Hotel d'Angleterre in Copenhagen, as he had done virtually every night of his literate life, Kim left a book facedown on the bedside table. The next afternoon, he returned to find the book closed, a piece of paper inserted to mark the page, and the following note, signed by the chambermaid, resting on its cover: SIR, YOU MUST NEVER DO THAT TO A BOOK. (1998, p. 37)

She goes on to characterize different ways of loving books. “The chambermaid believed in courtly love. A book’s physical self was sacrosanct to her...” (1998, p. 38). Fadiman and her immediate family, however, prefer a more comfortable intimacy with books that allows them to make use of them without much worry about their physical condition. For her, the broken spines, scuffed covers, and ragged pages of volumes indicate an ongoing and relaxed relationship with them. Do we treat our books as special treasures, or as comfortable friends? Which books become one or the other?

Mike describes another tactile element of reading:

To talk about the physical aspect of reading, when you’re reading with a child—that’s very physical. They’re up on your lap or when they’re too big for your lap, they’re under your arm and you can smell—they’re right out of the bath and so you can smell the shampoo or whatever—the clean hair and the slightly warm, damp skin because they’re hot from the tub. And a special blanket that they’re clutching. You know, it’s all intensely physical and a really wonderful thing. (Mike)

How many of us associate books with such bedtime cuddling? How many of us are introduced to books as part of a nightly ritual leading us to rest and sleep? It is not surprising that I and so many people I know conclude our days with reading time. The weight of the book, its rectangular shape, the dimming of the words on the page as our eyes grow heavier—all become part of our transition between the worlds of waking and sleep. To make that transition, we pass through yet another world, that of fiction.

Books become not only sensual objects in themselves, but part of our environment. The place we read becomes a place of refuge in our physical lifeworld. Our recollections of reading experiences often include the settings in which we read. “If you set me down in the dark vestibule of the Washington Square Library in Kalamazoo,

Michigan, a beautiful building with ivy-colored walls, I would recognize the holy place at once. The entry's unique aroma and the coolness of the slate floor and stone walls are still in my bones" (Thomas, 1997, p. 255). In the same way, I can easily envision and return to the dun-colored building, the slightly dusty aroma, the smoothness of the wooden shelves, and the coolness of the concrete block walls of the Queensborough Public Library of my own childhood, where our mother took us every week for a new supply of books.

Again, the books themselves contain a myriad of textures and tactile experiences. We feel the rush of wind and cold in snowbound scenes and become lethargic in tropical ones. We become parched in deserts and waterlogged on long sea voyages. We feel our own skin irritated by the grits on which the protagonist of *The Secret Life of Bees* (Monk Kidd, 2002) must kneel as a punishment. We shiver at the dankness of Dickensian cellars and feel the roughness of their battered wooden furniture. The surfaces of fictional worlds construct a framework for our inhabitation. In what ways do we construct those worlds through the textures we read?

The Taste of Reading

At a certain point of my childhood, I manifested the eating disorder of pica. An observer could always tell where I had gotten to in a book because I would pull off a piece of each page's corner and eat it as I finished the page. I did this only with the books that I considered my own—I didn't, for instance, treat library books this way. It must have driven my parents, who wanted to inculcate good treatment for books, mad. I don't remember them ever speaking to me directly about this habit, but I seem to recall my

mother bringing it up with our family doctor at one of my checkup visits. I think he reassured her that it wasn't uncommon, and after a time, I stopped. The taste of paper is bland and dry; it's a bit scratchy in your mouth. You can chew the corner as you mull over what's happening in the book. I have often wondered about this odd little peccadillo of mine. As it turns out, there is a word, bibliophagy, for this syndrome. Fadiman points to two examples. "Menelik II, the Emperor of Ethiopia at the turn of the century, liked to chew pages from his Bible. Unfortunately, he died after consuming the complete Book of Kings" (1998, pp. 41-42). She goes on to describe a more domestic instance:

When my son was eight months old, it could truthfully be said that he devoured literature. Presented with a book, he chewed it... The great Philadelphia bookdealer A.S.W. Rosenbach deduced that one reason first editions of *Alice in Wonderland* were so scarce was that so many of them had been eaten. (1998, p. 95)

Do we want to absorb books in a literal sense? Is it perhaps a way of possessing books more fully, of truly taking them into ourselves? Although we all may not wish to consume books so directly, we still often talk about voracious readers. "For me the act of reading is like the act of eating. That is how I experience it—a devouring of the words on the page, a taking into myself, the fulfillment of some elemental need" (Malone, 2003, p. 31). We are hungry for what books can give us.

The tastes described within books provide yet another sensory dimension to our vicarious experience. We wonder what the Mock Turtle Soup in *Wonderland* might taste like, or long to produce a savory *boeuf en daube* as one of Virginia Woolf's heroines might. We can relish the luxury of the strawberries in a Jane Austen picnic scene or be left hungry by thin gruel in an orphanage. The flavors within fiction contribute to the

concrete lifeworlds they create, nourishing us figuratively. What are the flavors of the books that sustain us?

As we move through the lifeworlds we experience through fiction, we take advantage of all the senses we have available to us in our corporeal body, and authors appeal to all those senses to make those worlds feel authentic to us. As embodied beings, we engage with the physicality of those settings to create a vivid and moving experience that draws us into those worlds. In those lifeworlds, we are not only bodily subjects, but beings in relationship. In what ways do our encounters in fictional lifeworlds influence our becoming?

The Lived Relationships of Reading

Just as books may offer us windows into the lives of others or mirror our own lives, they draw us into relationship, both with others and with ourselves. “The living body is thus the very possibility of contact, not just with others but with oneself—the very possibility of reflection, of thought, of knowledge” (Abram, 1996, p. 45). We can make contact through our reading and through sharing what we read. As we process and think about how what we’ve read has broadened our horizons, we advance in knowledge that allows us to engage more reflectively with the world and with other beings. We move from knowledge to being-with and to being-in-the-world. Works of fiction and other works of the imagination move us from a literal world into one of metaphor and imagery, and give that world a unique power. Such works mediate between what Abram describes as “our mental *concepts* and our bodily *percepts*” (1996, p. 42). When we come

to understanding through these percepts, we can sense what we learn more deeply in our being. We understand not only with our minds, but with our souls.

As Greene points out about imagination:

Also, it opens up a world of meanings; indeed, by means of the making of metaphors, imagination can reorient consciousness through its disclosure of patterns, relationships, shadows and lights and slivers of sound that are wholly unexpected, “new” in some wonderful fashion. (1997/2001h, p. 154)

As our consciousness is reoriented, we don't merely experience, but we create meanings that allow us to move into deeper ways of being with others and with ourselves. Our relationships are informed by these layers of meaning, felt deeply within us through the power of metaphor, and enriched by the understanding we have gained through the workings of the imagination. What do others become to us through our reading?

I can hardly conceive of how limited my perception would be without the books I have been privileged to read, how superficial my understanding of others, how undeveloped my sympathies. And I mean here, especially without fiction, which puts flesh and blood on, and soul and feeling in, other human beings. (Malone, 2003, p. 164)

Malone describes one of the most wonderful qualities of gaining understanding through fiction. As we perceive more deeply and respond to the soul and feeling we discover in others, we can intensify our relationships and attend to them with greater concern. Who are the book-beings who come to mean the most to us?

Relationships with Characters

We engage with those who populate the phantom world of books just as we engage with the people who surround us in the physical world. While the relationships we develop with fictional characters cannot be played out mutually, they nevertheless

become relationships that affect us emotionally. Mike describes his daughter's reaction to the imputed death of Gandalf when he reads *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954/2004) to his two children: "She was just sobbing...bawling." When he reaches the end of the saga, where the fellowship is dissolved and characters separate into different realms, both children and their father are in tears. "I can hardly read because I'm crying, because I've got this third-grader holding onto my shoulder, crying and crying."

Gina speaks about the same type of reaction when a favorite character dies or is threatened, and of reacting physically, experiencing the emotion in her solar plexus, just as she does when a person she loves faces danger or misfortune. "If something happens in a relationship with somebody I love, you know, and something's not right, that's where I feel it." She speaks of her strong reaction to the death of Aslan in C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1955/1994), and of still mourning Dumbledore's death in the Harry Potter stories (Rowling, 2005).

Both Mike and Gina talk of not wanting books to end because they don't want to leave behind the relationships that they've built with the characters. According to Gina, "You're just wrapped up in a whole world, you know, and I just—I don't want to leave it. Some books, I don't want them to end, and I'm really sad when I finish." Mike echoes this sentiment. "I know that there are some books that you just don't want to leave because you like the people. You don't want them to leave; you don't want the book to end." We experience a sense of loss and separation from the characters we have embraced, just as we grieve over separations from friends and family.

Our relationships with characters needn't all be about loss, however. Many of them become good friends who stay loyal throughout the years and seldom disappoint us. Doll acknowledges "the reality of literature's characters who can, if we let them, show us not only the drama to enliven living but also the theories to ignite authenticity" (2000, p. 83). How do we become more ourselves through these relationships? Doll also asserts, "...fiction—more than fact—teaches wisdoms about the human condition precisely because fiction connects readers with what courses within themselves" (2000, p. xi). Sara Crewe's triumph can draw us to recognize our own strengths; Elizabeth Bennet's recognition of her prejudices can lead us to examine our own blind spots. As Michael Dorris observes, "Reading anything that moves you, disturbs you, thrills you is a path into the great swirl of humanity, past, present, and future" (1997, p. xiv). We have all of those human beings available to us in fiction, and can laugh with them, weep with them, embark on adventures, and learn from them simply with the turn of a page.

Relationships with Authors

We enter into relationship not only with the characters, but also with the authors who create fiction that calls to us especially. In preliminary conversations with book group friends, I speak of my intense reaction to the death of a character in the Inspector Lynley detective series written by Elizabeth George (2005), and of being completely furious when a character is killed. My rage is directed at the author for making the choice of this character rather than another I don't care for as much (in fact care for very little). I not only mourn the loss of someone I liked, but worry about the effect this death will have upon other characters, particularly the one closest to her. I take umbrage at the

particularly poignant circumstances of the death, as the character is killed while she is pregnant, and the death is emblematic of random violence in the urban environment rather than being related to the overall investigation that is the subject of the book.

I am infuriated with the author for making these choices, because she has deprived me of someone I've seen growing and changing, someone who was a comforting presence in an uncomfortable world. While I didn't weep in the way that Mike's daughter Ginnie wept for Gandalf, I was angry and grief-stricken for quite awhile, and distressed enough to bring this experience into two different conversations, separated in time. In both these conversations, I recognize that acknowledging that the people we're missing do not actually exist doesn't lessen the emotions we experience at their loss. Max van Manen observes, "The narrative power of story is that sometimes it can be more compelling, more moving, more physically and emotionally stirring than lived-life itself" (2003, p. 129). Our relationships with fictional beings can carry that power as well, engaging our emotions with surprising strength, and we look to the author to protect and nurture those relationships. What are the dyadic relationships we develop through textual engagement?

Authors can please us as well as annoy us. When I find a book I particularly like, I generally read everything else I can find by that same author, a habit that many of my reading friends share. Of course, writers such as Stephen King and John Grisham have made immense fortunes from this tendency. Author readings and book-signings are popular events, allowing us to see and hear the person who has brought us such great pleasure and to ask the questions that may give us insight into the workings of their

minds. I treasure books that have been signed by Robertson Davies, P.D. James, and others, and remember their reading performances with great pleasure. Malone gives us insight into the power wielded by authors and the good they may do with it:

They have finely observed and given testimony to the mysteries of life and personality, to motive, intention, and action, to passion and to suffering and death, to love and hatred, to hope and fear, to evil, to bliss, to the beauty of nature and our powerlessness under its ravages, to our struggle with human movements and institutions, to our search for meaning and the good, and some of them, explicitly, to our search for God. (2003, p. 169)

We develop relationships not only with the personages attached to books (characters and authors), but also with others who engage with them from the outside world. Devoted readers represent a community of understanding, a group to which we belong through the simple expedient of loving books.

Relationships with Other Readers

Sharing the emotions and reactions we have to books becomes one of the ways fiction can also engage us in relationship with one another in the “real” world. When Mike and Gina and I express our physically and emotionally experienced response to fictional events, we develop a deeper understanding of one another as people. As we learn more about what moves other readers, what they respond to in terms of the character, and what qualities they admire and feel pain at losing, we form a bond in sharing both the pain and the understanding. We connect to each other through books and through the shared experiences of reading the same novels, interacting with the same characters, and yet developing unique perspectives about these interactions. In what ways are we enriched when we can connect to these perspectives?

My experience in facilitating a workplace book group provides strong evidence for all these bonding qualities of fiction. While a few members attended intermittently, a core group evolved that showed up consistently for the bimonthly discussions. All of these members have remarked upon how they enjoyed the opportunity to be able to read something they enjoyed (or did not enjoy) and to bring their ideas into a forum where others would understand the story that had affected them and offer additional interpretations and insights to enrich their reading. All of them have often expressed regret that job changes and relocations have led to the dispersal of the group, and that they miss being able to share that conduit to relationship.

The lived experience of reading connected us. We developed a mutual frame of reference, based on books we had shared. For example, one selection became the standard of awfulness by which subsequent less-loved books were judged. “It was/wasn’t as bad as *Possession* (Byatt, 1990),” indicated where a selection fell in our estimation. This type of shorthand became another bond for us. We discovered mutual interests in understanding our preferences for various genres. Our reactions to the behavior of the characters we encountered indicated to one another how we approached life and how both our lives and our reading had shaped us. We enjoyed the discovery that someone else felt the same way about a particular passage, or found a particular character enticing or maddening.

The feeling of being understood, “of somebody totally getting you, of somebody understanding all aspects of you,” of discovering that others, even fictional characters, can share in our ways of being is one of the elements of reading that Gina identifies as

most attractive to her. When she reads about a woman who has the type of supportive romantic relationship she would like, she muses: “I wish I could feel that way in my real life...and that’s what keeps me coming back...I keep looking for that.” She has shared such books with her daughter, even while observing that Michelle doesn’t really have a context for such relationships as yet. “I think it’ll give her something to draw on later.” For Gina, teaching her daughter how to negotiate “real” life includes providing models from fiction.

In talking about others who recognized the special value of *A Little Princess* (Hodgson-Burnett, 1905/1990), Schwartz says, “There is nothing to match the affinity of people who were defined and nourished by the same book, who shared a fantasy life” (1996, p. 47). I can attest to the thrill I felt as I read Schwartz’s book and discovered a fellow Sara-phile. “When present to such works, we experience a distinctive kind of relationship, not solely with them but with the others attending around us, each in their own way” (Greene, 1990/2001i, p. 81). These affinities bind us and involve us in concerned being-toward one another. Our relationships, whether with characters, authors, or other readers, become part of the fictional experiences that help us to become ourselves.

The Lived Self of Reading

Another question that addresses the existential elements of reading might be, *who* are we when we read? In a preliminary conversation, Emma posits that the self who is the reader represents our essential self, our soul. “What is the essence of your being—does it depend on being connected to the body? I kind of think of it that wherever it is that the

essence of being myself is, that is independent of the physical thing—that's the piece that is engaged with the book." Not only do we experience the lifeworlds of reading in a sensory way, we engage with those worlds at the deepest levels of our being. "What *does* it mean to be a human, if it is not the existence of a self-present interiority confronted with an exterior filled with objects and other self-present interiorities that present themselves to me?" (Carp, 1998, p. 96). Fiction provides us with many ways of engaging with our own interiority and that of others.

The Reading Self

In addition to using fiction to create our identities as human beings engaged in the world, we create our identities as readers. Reading becomes not only an activity, but also a way of defining ourselves. What are the ways in which we characterize our reading selves? We are literate, interested in the world around us, and capable of experiencing much more than we would have the opportunity to come across in our ordinary lives. We are not bound by time and space, but can draw from all realms of human experience to distill our own worldviews. We are print junkies, acolytes of the written word, participants in the give and take of relationship through the exchange of slim and substantial volumes. We are readers. Many of us would describe ourselves as Bill Holm does:

I loved books in two ways. First, I read them like an addict. A day—even an hour or two—without print makes me edgy and hungry. I hide books in my car, both trunk and cubbyhole, in my office drawers, in side pockets of duffel bags. I buy small books to carry in my pocket, just in case. The vision of jail with a good library is not so bad. With no books, I'd be a fine candidate for suicide. (1997, p. 104)

Readers often describe themselves as “voracious.” Mike uses that term when he talks about not being able to read *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1902/2004) in high school, despite being a voracious reader. Wordsworth, my favorite bookstore in Cambridge, Massachusetts, used the phrase “For the voracious reader” on its bags and in its advertising. Unfortunately, it was one of the independent bookstore casualties of the Amazon and Barnes & Noble era. From the Latin noun *voracitās* and the adjective *vorax* (Barnhart, 1988, p. 1212), the quality of voracity implies greed, eagerness, and difficulty in being satisfied. Such readers often find themselves with an insatiable appetite for the books in which they find so much satisfaction. According to Aswell Doll, “Fiction feeds the soul’s hunger; words are like food for starved souls” (2000, p. xvi). Holm claims, “Books contain the seven basic food groups of the soul. Ignore them and you starve inside; you die with a malnourished, shriveled, bony spirit” (1997, pp. 104-105).

Books not only alert us to who we are, but also to who we are not. The lives that David and Ann (our parochial school equivalent of Dick and Jane) led were clearly different from ours—we lived in a city, not a suburb, we didn’t have a cunning little puppy to amuse us, and daddy didn’t come home from work in a car. I learned more about the American myth of the happy family that faces adversity with grace through books such as *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew* (Sidney, 1880/1985), even as I recognized that the Peppers lived in a very different time and place. Nevertheless, I longed for the closeness their family displayed, the optimism that they brought to their trials, and the shared joy they took in any good fortune that passed their way. I longed for a mother who met daily challenges with understanding and encouragement, instead of

one who was more consistently critical and pessimistic. Reading allowed me to experience worlds that fulfilled these longings, if only for a while. As we see other options for being, in what ways does our reading change us?

The Changing Self

The self we nurture through reading does not simply accept and enter into the lifeworlds, but learns to critique them as well. As we grow and change, the windows and mirrors that compose our lenses on the world also evolve, both influenced by our reading and affecting how we read. As our consciousness changes, our perspective is refined, and we alter the meanings we make of the same materials.

As a child, I never gave much thought to the relationships of mistresses and servants depicted in Hodgson-Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905/1990) or Alcott's *Rose in Bloom* (1876/1986). As an adult, however, I was intrigued at the differing perspective expressed in the two novels. In the first, Sara returns to the employer's role after spending time in the servant one. While she engages Becky in her own household, "rescuing" her from the abuse of Miss Minchin's establishment, it doesn't seem to occur to Sara, Becky, or the author that Becky would have any role beyond ministering to Sara's needs. While Becky's physical circumstances become much more comfortable, she is still only an attendant. In Alcott's work, on the other hand, the relationship of Rose and Phebe evolves into a true friendship and Rose becomes a fierce advocate for Phebe to be accepted as a full member of polite society and of her own family. In rereading these novels, I considered whether these differing approaches might be related to the stratified society of Victorian England versus the ostensibly more egalitarian one favored by

American Transcendentalists. Although we may read the same books multiple times, the self we bring to them differs each time, and the fictional experience differs as well. The self we create grows up and continues to develop, and our reading both enriches and is enriched by that growth.

Of course, rereading childhood favorites can also give us insight into how we've changed as human beings. My encounter with *Black Beauty* (Sewell, 1877/1988) as an adult was quite disappointing. I had grown enough to find the book's moralizing extremely heavy-handed, to find the characters one-dimensional, and to be disappointed with the author's seemingly shallow acceptance of a rigid class system. "Perhaps at every stage what we read is what we are, or what we are becoming, or desire" (Schwartz, 1996, p. 106). Fortunately, the infinite variety of fiction provides us with multiple lifeworlds to inhabit, and we can often find the one we need at the time we need it. What role does fiction play in the questioning and search for meaning that is our quest to become ourselves?

The Developed Self

Admittedly, reading fiction represents only one way that we learn to make meaning out of our lives, but it is an important one. Fiction is powerful, and can jolt us into understanding in ways that both illuminate and motivate other types of encounters. The books we read in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood nourish us in different ways and provide us with the types of understanding we can grasp at that time. Quindlen notes that "...there are some of us who have built not a life but a self, based largely on our hunger for what are a series of scratches on a piece of paper" (1998, p. 15). That self is

the reader who is touched by the metaphoric lifeworlds, who enters into relationship within them, and who seeks meaning in the lived experience of fiction. This process becomes part of our becoming in the world:

Reading helps develop binocularity: the ability to look at something from two points of view so that it becomes three-dimensional. How a book makes you feel and how living with a grandmother and four siblings and two parents makes you feel can be two different things, but by considering them together you have a larger sense of the validity of both. (Maguire, 1997, p. 152)

We link our daily experience with our fictional life, and each informs and illuminates the other, with the whole becoming more than the sum of its parts. We attend to our own lives differently because of our reading, whether that may be because of insights we have gained into the feelings and motivations of others, or a greater perception of our own interiority that allows us to be more true to our authentic being. “Reading was the ticket that entitled me to my place in the world” (Schwartz, 1996, p. 18). In what ways do we place ourselves in lifeworlds through reading?

The ways in which reading discloses and changes our lives do not always need to be dramatic:

In fact, you may credit significant turns that you have taken in life to a certain book, or certain books. Less noticed by us, however, are the many more subtle ways that our reading has influenced the works-in-progress that we are, or how our reading has led us, one way or another, on the journey we’ve made to become who we are now. And we can be sure that, as long as we live and read, other books will accompany us, like wise and honest friends on the quest to become who we are meant to be. (Malone, 2003, p. 2)

For readers, the engagement with other worlds is a daily practice. We live and breathe our reading because it is part of our landscape, part of the core of our lifeworlds. We may

barely notice how we are affected by our reading on a daily basis, and this myopia is perhaps another good reason to undertake a study of what the essence of our experience as readers creating selves might be.

“From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings” (van Manen, 2003, p. 5). Examining the question of how we use fiction to create ourselves provides a fertile source of insight into how we come to know our world and a different but potent way of experiencing it. We can learn quite a bit about ourselves and our world by examining the question: **What is the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction?** In the next chapter I develop the philosophical and methodological grounding that will allow me access to this question.

**CHAPTER THREE:
READING AND BEING: PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDING**

*Write! She told herself
Write!*

The page remained blank

What is wrong with you? she asked

*Then fell into story
Narrative that placed her elsewhere
Another place, another time*

*Time experienced, not scrutinized
Not drawn apart into clock-time
Or some sort of ur-time that needed explication*

*Just—time. Time spent in watching
The story unfold, anticipating
How characters might act or react. Time
in a realm of imagination that became
a cocoon of ease*

*She saw her own story emerging,
the story she had determined for herself*

Her pen began to move (McShane, 2008)

Language and Living

Words can summon up a skyline from the dark; they can bring back the people you loved and will always yearn for. They can inspire you with possibilities you otherwise would never have imagined; they can fill your head with misleading fantasies. They can give you back your seemingly seamless past and place it right alongside your chaotic present. (Corrigan, 2005, p. 184)

We conduct our being-in-the-world through language. Heidegger (1953/1996) acknowledges that language is an essential element of being human, and operative in the ways that humans bring themselves into being. The language we find in the books we read becomes a catalyst for us, stimulating the reactions through which we become

ourselves. Through reading, we move from the unconsidered “they-self” to the authentic self. “The self of everyday *Da-sein* is the *they-self* which we distinguish from the *authentic self*, the self which has explicitly grasped itself” (Heidegger, p. 121). Reading steers us into such consideration and into undertaking the task of grasping ourselves. “Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings to their being from out of their being” (Heidegger, 1971/2001c, p. 71). The linguistic naming that takes place as we read fiction becomes part of our process of bringing ourselves into being. We name our own worlds, as well as worlds we imagine. We interact with others who resemble people in our past, our present, and perhaps our future. Fiction allows us to mediate between the they-self we develop to negotiate our everyday life and the more authentic self in which we recognize and nurture the core of our being.

Reading Our Way into the World

The experience of coming into being through reading fiction is one I wish to explore because of its importance in my own life. I have identified myself as a reader since I was a young child, and that element of my identity is extremely important to me. My way of making meaning in my lived world is to read and to absorb ideas, attitudes, and possibilities from my reading. I read not only because I am compelled to do so (although I have often described myself as a “print junkie”), but also because reading enables me to make sense/meaning of my own experience. I am not alone in my addiction to print; Schwartz describes such dependence: “My addiction is to works of the imagination” (1996, p. 3). Van Manen seems to suffer from the same compulsion. “I cannot help but read signs, announcements, discarded flyers, bits of text everywhere

around me. Just as the sandy beach invites play, so a text invites us to read” (1985, p. 177). We print addicts, however, have a habit that doesn’t remove us from the world, but rather engages us with it.

Being an addicted reader didn’t make me oblivious to the world around me—on the contrary, my appetite for detail seemed to grow according to the expansion of my mind...Reading was not a give-and-take experience. It was give and give and give. It took nothing away. (Nye, 1997, p. 196)

Reading gives us worlds, gives us mirrors, gives us windows. It gives us doors to move among worlds. It gives us alternative selves to try on and accept or discard. It gives us ourselves as beings.

My sense of reading and fiction as elements that support my own coming into being is echoed by friends, family, coworkers, acquaintances, and even strangers encountered by chance. I am myself not only through my own experiences, but also through the vicarious experiences I have incorporated into my own feeling, recognizing, and pondering. From the children’s story of a toy engine that could believe in its own possibilities to a moving account of an immigrant’s struggles, books have provided many of us with insights, epiphanies, and gentle nudges into new ways of being-in-the-world. We grow through the intellectual, sensual, emotional, and spiritual nourishment that books provide for us.

For me, an engaging question is not only, “How shall we live?” but also, “How shall we teach our children to live?” As H. Peter Steeves observes, “Increasingly, education in the United States is taken to be job training, vocational preparation and rubber-stamping, the minor leagues in which players are groomed for their eventual positions in corporate America” (2006, p. 185). If we want to be instrumental in developing an educational system that is more than a sorting mechanism for economic

winner and loser, it may help to engage with more expansive ideas of what may constitute learning and the ways in which it may take place. Van Manen acknowledges that novels can teach. “The novel stakes a claim and in that moment, it may teach us, transforming us in a special way” (1985, p. 177). He goes on, “What is revealed in the experience of fictional literature is not fact or incidence, news or controversy, but the reality of possibility: the reality of imaginable human experience” (1985, p. 177).

When manifold human experiences become imaginable through fiction, when we have many windows through which we can gaze into multiple ways of being, our own ways of being can be expanded and transformed. As readers, we come to understand others in a lived way; as students, we can translate that understanding into concerned being-toward and can engage with others we encounter with greater empathy. What would our schools look like if their goals included such connections, rather than a focus on preparing students to take their assigned roles within the military-industrial complex? What would our world look like if its inhabitants were groomed for understanding and encountering one another in a variety of settings and ways of being, rather than looking to exploit one another for financial gain? “As readers we come to know situations and relations in such a way that persons and lives begin to matter. We cannot remain untouched” (van Manen, 1985, p. 183). Who do I become when I have vicariously lived through an experience that reflects yours, and what does that mean for how we are as self and Other?

Examining the lived experience of creating self through reading can perhaps contribute to understanding that leads us to question the forced march to ever-increasing standardized testing. My research may engender some support for recognition of the

importance of the humanities in a technologically focused world. Attention to creating meaning rather than technical expertise could unlock possibilities for a humanistic pedagogy that responds to students as beings rather than commodities.

We should think of education as opening public spaces in which students, speaking in their own voices and acting on their own initiatives, can identify themselves and choose themselves in relation to such principles as freedom, equality, justice, and concern for others. (Greene, 1995, p. 68)

Fiction has a place in such opening, providing spaces for different ways of knowing and being. “So what fictional literature reveals to us is a knowing that is more like a living” (van Manen, 1985, p. 178). As learners, we can be moved and changed through such knowing/living; as teachers, we can draw on the special quality of fiction to support the growth it engenders.

Creating Self in Reading

The experience of using what we read to establish contact with our own being takes place within the realm of the search for authenticity. We become beings who have had mirrors held up to us and have recognized truths about ourselves, or we have looked through windows to understand why others feel or act as they do. We enter into a series of reflections. “Various thinkers have noted that lived experience first of all has a temporal structure: it can never be grasped in its immediate manifestation but only reflectively as past presence” (van Manen, 2003, p. 36).

“Reflection” derives from the combination of the Latin *re* meaning “back” and *flectere*, “to bend” (Barnhart, 1988, p. 901), with particular emphasis on bending back light. In reading, we turn and turn again, from mirrored reflections of ourselves to the windows that allow us to view others. As we do so, we reflect in another sense, in a way that draws us into meditation, pondering, turning our thoughts this way and that as the

reflections become prismatic. We are drawn into imaginative worlds that lead us to reflection and to concerned ways of being. “Imagination...is an indigenous connective tissue through which world [and] self are concernfully manifest and taken under care” (Anton, 2001, p. 45). The ways in which reading appeals to our imagination provide the connective tissue through which we assemble a sense of our own identity, our own being. We connect with our own hearts, minds, and embodiment through the experiences we undergo vicariously. Through this connection and reflection, we begin to grasp our own lives, as well as those of others, and to make meaning from the lived sense of being engendered.

In this chapter, I take the experience of creating a sense of self into concerned care by putting it into context within the philosophical grounding of phenomenology. An important element of this grounding is addressing the concept of Being. Even Heidegger concedes that defining Being can be a daunting task. “It is said that ‘being’ is the most universal and the emptiest concept. As such, it resists every attempt at definition” (1953/1996, p. 1). He goes on to observe, “The concept of ‘being’ is indefinable” (1953/1996, p. 2). While acknowledging that such definition may be impossible, I seek to understand Being and to develop a working relationship with a notion of Being that can be helpful in examining the phenomenon.

In a somewhat tautological construction, Heidegger asserts, “Being is always the being of a being” (1953/1996, p. 7). It is worthwhile to consider the various ways in which the word “being” conveys meaning within that statement. We have the enveloping notion of Being, the action of being, and the person who is the being. From the overarching concept, we are drawn into the particular, the individual. Every experience

that we can express and understand is undertaken by a sentient being; we must seek to understand experience at a personal level to grasp its essence and the nature of the overarching experience. As van Manen observes, "...to orient oneself to a phenomenon always implies a particular interest, station or vantage point in life" (2003, p. 40). A phenomenological exploration of the reading/self-creation experience allows us to make a foray into developing a deeper understanding of Being. The being that we become through books is one who is a participant in universal Being; in engaging with that being/becoming, we begin to enlarge our perception of Being.

Reading and the Authentic Self

Reading allows us to grasp ourselves and others, giving us a pathway to reach our own authenticity. We move from our everyday selves to something more evolved: a self that has understood itself, a self that finds a new path to ways of being with others. Through reading, we evolve a consciousness that allows us to recognize our own state of *Da-sein*.

If *Da-sein* explicitly discovers the world and brings it near, if it discloses its authentic being to itself, this discovering of 'world' and disclosing of *Da-sein* always comes about by clearing away coverings and obscurities, by breaking up the disguises with which *Da-sein* cuts itself off from itself. (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 121)

Reading offers us ways of discovering multiple worlds, opening multiple experiences to us. It clears away coverings and obscurities through illuminating multiple ways of being and allowing us to experience them. Through reading, we can both take on and cast off disguises. We can gaze into a mirror and see ourselves taking on an identity that we may long for or perhaps one we would not wish to live through in everyday life. We can look through reading windows into the lives others live, and join both them and ourselves.

When glass is backed with a silvery substance, we can perceive ourselves, and can choose to spend time in both gazing at that self and scrutinizing it. We can choose to bask in approval of our image, or we can be troubled by the reflection and driven to change or enhance what we see. The experience becomes even richer when the backing, which has blocked our view in turning our own image back to us, falls away, and we are able to perceive, gaze at, and scrutinize others through the glass that has now become a window.

Those of us who choose phenomenology as the window through which we examine our world must grapple with the quandary of developing our vision from ideas that trace their foundation to Heidegger when we are also confronted with his Nazi past. How do we reconcile the notion of authentic selfhood with a proponent whose self-consideration allowed a liaison with such a brutal and murderous group? How do we clear away the “coverings and obscurities” that may mask his own failure to recognize the consequences of his actions? I have not been able to answer such questions completely, but I do find some illumination in making use of phenomenological concepts to critique Heidegger and thereby to evolve my own consciousness.

Through a notion such as bracketing, I can recognize my own resistance to the ways in which Heidegger acted while examining what may have driven him to act in those ways. Certainly any reader of novels comes across characters who are led astray by their own flawed thinking, and it is possible to make an imaginary leap into understanding how ambition, fear, vanity, and any of a number of other influences could have propelled him into ingratiating himself with a powerful force. I am well acquainted with many of my own human frailties and yet, through my engagement with

phenomenology, I have become aware that there are likely many flaws I possess of which I am still unconscious because I take them for granted so much in my worldview.

In the same way, I can see Heidegger becoming enamored of the image that he perceives in the mirror. For him, the silver backing never falls away to allow him to see the Other more clearly. He is unable to complete the kind of self-examination that he proposes, but his failure does not prevent our undertaking that journey and completing it as best we can. In writing of “Heidegger the Fox,” Hannah Arendt (1953/2000) describes a fox who designs his own burrow as a trap, becomes annoyed because other foxes do not fall into it, and eventually decorates it to call attention to the fact that it is a trap. While this action does eventually bring others to him, who enter the trap consciously, but can escape, he is the only one who cannot leave, because it has been made to measure for him. “Nobody knows the nature of traps better than one who sits in a trap his whole life long” (p. 544). While Heidegger may be entrapped by his own ideas, we have the ability to recognize them and yet to question them in ways that allow us to stay free. Arendt recognizes how Heidegger has become ensnared by his own flawed thinking, and how impossible it has become for him to extricate himself. For us as readers, however, literature offers us insights into many ways in which we can escape from our own entrapment by opening windows for our consciousness.

Ultimately, we can use Heidegger’s idea of the authentic, considered self, to initiate our self-reflection through reading, and hope to move beyond a selfhood that can be so damaging to the Other. Our awareness of Heidegger’s failure to question his involvement with Nazism deeply enough makes us all the more aware of the need for such questioning and self-reflection. We still struggle with the notion that even in such

self-questioning, the authenticity that emerges may be one that chooses to engage in malevolence toward others. Rüdiger Safranski claims for Heidegger, “He learned a lesson from what he had done, and his thinking subsequently focused on the problem of the seducibility of the spirit by the will to power” (1994/1998, p. x). Safranski goes on to say, “He who is acquainted with his contingent self is less likely to confuse himself with the heroes of his thinking self, or to let the little stories drown in great history. In short: knowledge of self protects against seduction by power” (1994/1998, p. 421). We readers are well acquainted with the importance of the “little stories;” indeed, they become primordial material in our own becoming. In our engagement with Heidegger, we seek to avoid the pitfalls of his entrapment as we search for our authentic selves.

“...These contradictions are embraced as part of the learning process, part of what one struggles to change—and that struggle is often protracted” according to bell hooks (1994, p. 56), as she describes her own need to question Paulo Freire’s sexism while simultaneously admiring much of his work. Our task becomes the self-examination, the questioning, that leads us to our own authenticity. Corey Anton observes, “...it might be more revealing to talk not of an ‘authentic self,’ but rather, to speak of ‘selfhood within authentic existence’” (2001, p. 152). Our selfhood becomes a constructed entity as we engage in making meaning through our reading. Our experience through reading becomes part of seeking an authentic existence, an existence that incorporates all that we can imagine being, an existence that has been developed through concerned consideration and through being-in-the-world in real and fully intended ways.

The “unconcealing/deconcealing” of narrative leads to truth, and we use the truths that we discover through narrative to construct our own sense of identity, as we come to understand our authentic self.

The art work opens up in its own way the being of beings. This opening up, i.e., this deconcealing, i.e., the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the art work, the truth of what is has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work. (Heidegger, 1971/2001c, p. 38)

Truth can be set to work through the art of fiction, becoming truth that informs our lives and our ways of being-in-the-world. “Thus art is: the creative preserving of truth in the work. Art then is the becoming and the happening of truth” (Heidegger, 1971/2001c, p. 69). For those who are readers, the truth of fiction calls to us.

The path to truth is available not only through philosophy, but also through art. Both philosophy and fiction serve to reveal truth. In this chapter, I explore how both philosophy and fiction can guide us as we make our own journeys into the truth of ourselves. Both connect us to a larger sense of Being, and both move us into truths that are larger than our own daily being. Both engage with the fundamental notion of *Da-sein*, being-there—philosophy to examine and illuminate the phenomenon, fiction to portray the experience. In my own attempt to develop the philosophical grounding necessary to open up the experience of creating a sense of self through fiction, I turn to my own experience with fiction and the ways it has opened up meaning and being-there to me and to others. About phenomenology, Husserl says, “This denotes a science, a system of scientific disciplines. But it also and above all denotes a method and an attitude of mind, the specifically philosophical attitude of mind, the specifically philosophical method” (1964/1990, pp. 18-19). I have chosen the method of phenomenology to explore the

experience of creating self through fiction because I believe it offers the best way to open up possibilities and to understand the power of narrative and its connection to our being.

I connect fiction with the ways we discover our own sense of being, of experiencing ourselves as beings. Fiction can uncover many signposts for us in our journey to selfhood. Looking at the characteristics that fiction and philosophy share, and at the differences that distinguish them from one another, I seek to create a picture of how both can be useful to us in making meaning and growing into more deeply human, more authentic selves. Where philosophy offers us life lessons within systems of thought, fiction offers us such lessons in a lived context. “Fiction solicits an experience of the world and then elicits a reflective interpretation of the textual experience” (van Manen, 1985, p. 187). We come to understand and make meaning of situations, choices, and consequences as we perceive them in an embodied, lived way by engaging with the characters who confront the situations, make choices about how they will deal with them, and live through the consequences of their actions. Where a philosophical treatise may treat a problem as an abstraction, fiction poses the problem as a lived event—lived by imaginary characters, perhaps, but lived nevertheless. We enter into their lifeworlds and participate, not with a detached attitude of observation, but with empathy that allows us to undergo an experience with the characters and to make meaning of it as the characters might, ultimately connecting that meaning with our own lives and lifeworlds, through such reflective interpretation.

Fiction and Connection

Anton recognizes the “symbolic or linguistic nature of self,” characterizing it as “sonorousness” (2001, p. 14). As sonorous beings, we call out to one another for

connection, for understanding, for acknowledgement as human creatures. That calling may be effected not only in direct conversation, not only in communications such as letters and memos and emails, but through literature. The author and the characters call to us, and we respond to that calling when we are moved to tears or laugh out loud, when we flag a meaningful passage, when we throw a book across a room because the author has annoyed us egregiously. We engage not only with our thoughts, but also with our hearts; we participate in a lived way. We incorporate this experience into our own being and move into being-in-the-world in a new way.

Why does the world need an investigation into the lived experience of constructing self through fiction? Why does this question seem to be important enough to me to spend many months in conversation, analysis, writing, and re-writing? When I read and contemplate, I want to be enlightened and to reach some understanding of how the questions that are important to me fit into the questions that are important in the cosmos. Fiction provides such answers, almost as often as philosophy does, for me. The unfolding of experience through the narrative of fiction and other types of storytelling, as well as the consideration of experience through philosophy, provide complementary paths of access to our own being and our participation in Being. I believe that a phenomenological investigation of our creation of self through reading fiction can provide an exploration of that experience that connects the power of story to deep elements of our being.

Indeed, to philosophize is to question not only *what* one sees, feels and thinks, but also *how* one does it. Philosophical practice is by nature self-reflective and self-referential, for embedded in it are attempts to analyse one's assumptions and beliefs, motives and fears, favourite clichés and intellectual strategies, insights and blind spots. (Cherkasova, 2004, p. 203)

Reading that becomes self-reflective also allows us to engage in questioning assumptions and beliefs, pointing out our blind spots to us and leading us to insights. Story has the power to re-reflect us into new paths, even as it reflects us to ourselves. Understanding the experience of self-creation through fiction can open up pedagogical engagements that recognize students as beings who engage in such self-reflection through narrative, and can connect the power of story to supporting their being-in-the-world.

Imagination is the capacity to posit alternative realities. It makes possible the creation of “as-if” perspectives, perspectives that can be opened metaphorically and, oftentimes, through the exercise of empathy...It is imagination that discloses possibilities—personal and social as well as aesthetic. (Greene, 2001c, p. 65)

We can open possibilities to our students through story, and can use narrative to provide entry into different worlds—worlds that could become their own, and worlds that can inform their own perspectives. Through understanding the lived experience of creating a sense of self through fiction, we can approach the teaching of literature in ways that connect it to real experience rather than empty exercises in identifying the sorts of elements that appear in standardized tests—listings of characters, chartings of plot lines, identification of a few approved “themes.” In exploring the ways that fiction can inspire and influence self-creation, we have an opportunity to learn about ways in which it can be important to students in the task of making meaning within their lives.

Learning from Fiction and Philosophy

Books teach me about how the connections we make to one another bring us both grief and solace. They transport me to other realities and allow me to live within worlds that I could not otherwise inhabit. Books touch my soul and give me important life lessons. Fiction has provided me with world-views, with understanding, with experiences

that are deeply and richly lived, even if they are vicarious. I am likely to recall a scene or character that can be helpful to me when I am puzzling out a course of action. Where philosophy can shape our thoughts, fiction can mediate between thought and action. The philosophical context of phenomenology can provide, perhaps, the best of both worlds. Cherkasova notes, “The dialectical, sceptical, critical or phenomenological project, or the envisioning of the world as will and idea all depend at some crucial juncture on drastic measures to break away from the ordinary, to think *otherwise*” (2004, p. 205). She also says, “What distinguishes the work of philosophers or philosophically inclined writers is their awareness of the numerous invisible possibilities and their eagerness to discover them” (2004, p. 203). Thinking *otherwise* allows us to open up to multiple possibilities, not just for ourselves, but also for those around us, for Others. This ability is important to our education, and can be sustained by such imaginative engagement.

...I think again of what engagement with works of art allow us to confront in our own experience that we would not otherwise confront. In part it is a matter of bringing to the surface forces, stirrings, desires we often cannot name. In part it is a matter of creating dialogical situations in which persons, caring for one another, are able to look through one another’s eyes, talk about what they are discovering together about themselves, about the world, about what it is and what it might be. (Greene, 1996/2001g, p. 108)

The dialogical nature of phenomenology also leads us to discovering together. We can then go on to live our lives in an attentive and conscious way, enriching our daily-ness with the thoughtfulness of praxis. Van Manen characterizes praxis as “thoughtful action: action full of thought and thought full of action” (2003, p. 159). To connect the ideas and insights we gather through both philosophy and fiction with our daily lives, we must put them into action within our being-in-the-world. Our thoughts translate into action, and our insights into selfhood.

It is possible that fiction may speak to us and forge a connection to our daily lives, in a complementary way to philosophy, because it often works through images and symbols. Fiction gives us not only information, but also metaphor—not only experience, but also ways of naming that experience, as well as imagery to make such naming vivid and memorable. Where fiction can present us with symbols in an embodied way, philosophical engagement may induce us to delve more deeply and uncover their meanings. Gadamer observes:

For this is what is characteristic of the work of art, the creation of genius: that its meaning lies in the phenomenon itself and is not arbitrarily read into it...Only because the concept of symbol implies the inner unity of symbol and what is symbolized, was it possible for the symbol to become a basic concept universal to aesthetics. (1960/2002, p. 77)

While we live life concretely, we experience and reflect upon it metaphorically. We discern the meaning of symbols by experiencing their power to move us and to provide embodied representations of what we undergo in our lifeworlds. Imagination is melded with thought to produce understanding. Meaning becomes something that is not arbitrary, but intrinsic to our embodied experience. “I submit that our *embodiment* is the gift through whose receptivity and responsiveness we may begin to retrieve that redeeming experience of Being” (Levin, 1985, p. 73). We can approach the world not only through our minds, but with all of our embodied being, recognizing the inner unity of our own being-in-the-world and Being. Phenomenology allows us to mediate between thought and experience by grounding our thinking in ever-deepening analysis of lived experience expressed in embodied ways. “Phenomenology is a description of things as they are that seeks to elicit or make explicit the sense of our practical involvement with the world” (Critchley, 2004, p. 196).

Reading Fiction and Phenomenology: Like and Unlike

I am often struck by the parallels between the practice of phenomenological inquiry and the experience of making meaning in our lives through fiction, although the two are different as well. Van Manen (2003) notes that “The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence” (p. 36). What, indeed, do novels accomplish but the very same thing? The writer does not give us a documentary of daily life, but chooses characters, settings, scenes, and transmutes them into a distillation of human experience that touches our souls. Writers provide us with texts that express the essence of living; philosophical consideration invites us to reflect upon what we have experienced through the reading and to incorporate what we take from the book into our own daily lifeworlds. “A genuine artistic expression is not just representational of some event in the world. Rather, it transcends the experiential world in an act of reflective existence” (van Manen, 2003, p. 97). Fiction engenders and supports such acts of reflective existence.

Phenomenology, on the other hand, takes reflection even further in order to tease out essential qualities. Both engage us in the process of attunement to the ontological question of being.

Our decision *is* how we live: how we are moved to comport ourselves, how we bear witness to that which has moved us, the kind of stand we take, and the various postures and positions by which we continually manifest what we have understood of the attunement. (Levin, 1985, p. 103)

The reflection we engage in through both the approach of phenomenological inquiry and through the more embodied experience of fiction enables us to make those decisions and to live them. In coming to understand the stands others have taken and the meaning

behind them, we develop our own. In the lives we lead, we manifest those positions. “A phenomenological concern always has this twofold character: a preoccupation with both the concreteness (the ontic) as well as the essential nature (the ontological) of a lived experience” (van Manen, 2003, pp. 39-40). Fiction also moves us into ontological concerns by presenting concrete instances. The ontological nature of phenomenological inquiry and the ontic nature of reading fiction combine to support the development of our own authentic ways of being-in-the-world.

“Because artists are involved in giving shape to their lived experience, the products of art are, in a sense, lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations” (van Manen, 2003, p. 74). Fiction is an example of this kind of art. The writer contributes the artistry that transforms and transcends the lived experience; the reader lives those experiences differently, in a way that has been focused by the artist. The immediacy of the experience of reading a novel transforms the sensory input it provides into a lived world that we dwell in through imaginative intentionality; its presence is still tangible to us. Anton’s comments describe this power of fiction to engage us and to speak to our being:

Many entities of “the there” are presented not merely through movement, touch, sight, hearing, smell, taste, or even affect. These objects, events, and person, are made manifest and drawn near through imaginative intentionality; threads of imaginative intentionality offer their own manner of releasing and appropriating world-experience. (2001, p. 45)

In phenomenological inquiry, I seek to transform the lived experience of reading and shaping oneself, thereby, into a distillation that explores its essential characteristics.

A good description that constitutes the essence of something is construed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way. (van Manen, 2003, p. 39)

Novels take everyday experiences and open up our understanding of them through the new perspectives and insights they give to us, and they engage us as being-in-the-world. “We can see in the author of a good novel answers to questions we didn’t even know to ask, declarations about our shared world that separate us in time and space even as they pull us together” (Steeves, 2006, p. 4). The vividness of the lived worlds we experience through reading leads us to grasp these experiences in a new way, and to see new significance in them, just as inquiry into a phenomenon allows us to understand it in a new way that expands our consciousness. Van Manen provides insight into way they differ, however.

Notice that one of the differences between literary narrative or poetry on the one hand, and phenomenology on the other hand, is that literature or poetry (although based on life) leaves the themes implicit, and focuses on plot or particular incident, whereas phenomenology attempts to systematically develop a certain narrative that explicates themes while remaining true to the universal quality or essence of a certain type of experience. (2003, p. 97)

For example, we could read several novels about a particular experience—all would be different and might focus on plots that unfold in different ways; they could contain varying constellations of characters, or be set in differing times and locales. We could see the experience from specific points of view, and those views may influence our own, but they are not collected into an overall portrayal of the essence of the experience. The portrayal remains individual and particular. A phenomenological narrative, on the other hand, would weave together the threads that reveal patterns and themes to produce a universal, essential portrait of the experience. Unlike the objectives of fiction, the goals for phenomenological inquiry are not to entertain or communicate, but to examine and illuminate.

Although literary narrative and human science narrative both find their fascination in situated life, in the situated human being, they locate their narratives in different starting points; they aspire to different epistemological ends. One difference is that phenomenology aims at making explicit and seeking universal meaning where poetry and literature remain implicit and particular. (van Manen, 2003, p. 19)

To examine the role that fiction plays in our self-development, I have chosen to conduct a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experience of creating a sense of self through reading. Through engaging in dialogue about taking the implicit and particular from fiction into one's lifeworld, I seek to make the meaning of such experience explicit through identifying the universal and essential.

Undertaking the Task of Phenomenology

Van Manen declares, "This then is the task of phenomenological research and writing: *to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience*" (2003, p. 41). Writers provide such "possible interpretations" in novels, describing experiences through the lenses of the characters and settings they have created. While we are aware that these are possibilities, they become possible realities to us as well. We are led to grasp these possibilities through the artistry of the writer, and to incorporate them into our own being through the power of fiction to move us. We overlay our own interpretations on these possibilities we consider, based on our own experiences—but the experience of the novel can move us to another plane of reflection and understanding. The orientation for a phenomenologist is different from that of a reader, in that the researcher must place the inquiry in a philosophical context and ground it in a hermeneutic mode of interpretation. I have chosen to engage with the phenomenon of creating a sense of self through reading fiction and to embark upon the task of interpreting the experience hermeneutically to elicit some understanding of its essence,

turning to my question: **What is the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction?** I attempt to explore the nexus of understanding humans with the ways that the aesthetic qualities of fiction engender that understanding, all the while being conscious of van Manen's caution, "Of course, we need to acknowledge that the epistemological objectives of the discourse of behavioral science differ from those of aesthetic discourse" (2003, p. 114).

In grasping other interpretations of the lived world, we can call into question our own outlook or can have it affirmed in a transformed way, just as we can find fiction that mirrors our own outlook or opens windows for us on the outlook of others. "But the role of imagination is not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve. It is to awaken, to disclose, the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected" (Greene, 1995, p. 28). Through experiencing an expanded set of possibilities from reading about them, we start to trouble our own notions because we become aware of other perspectives. This troubling is an important characteristic of phenomenological inquiry and must be acknowledged as we engage in the bracketing of our own assumptions in exploring the experience we have chosen.

We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character. (van Manen, 2003, p. 47)

In dealing with the phenomenological challenge of bracketing, I was able to recognize some of my assumptions, and discovered others as I move through the process. I acknowledge that there might be some that never came to light because they are so much a part of my own worldview and character and were never challenged or questioned in our conversations.

One assumption I make is the notion that literature can be meaningful and an important part of people's lives. While I am certainly acquainted with many for whom this is true, and selected participants who share this belief, I know that there is also a significant population for whom books are not essential. I certainly found a lack of interest in reading in many of the students I taught; they were viewers, not readers. We are becoming more and more a post-literate society, if we consider literacy to be the literacy of reading. We are perhaps developing other kinds of literacy—screen literacy, or a heightened literacy in the manipulation of imagery, for example—but the act of obtaining information or pleasure or understanding through the printed page may be less and less valued throughout society.

Another of my assumptions, however, is that reading books will not disappear entirely. I'm encouraged by the fact that every generation seems to have many members who still take pleasure in the way a small collection of pages can transport them into a different world, though I see a generation emerging that is more familiar with other conduits for entertainment and information and turns to them more readily. Movies appear on ever-smaller personal screens, and a world full of film clips exists on Web sites. As young people connect through social networking sites, a "second world" of virtual avatars becomes an alternative social milieu for many. Students no longer trek to the library to look something up in an encyclopedia, but turn to Web sites such as Google® and Wikipedia® for their preliminary (and all too often only) research. Multiple volumes are stored electronically and projected on small reading devices. The printed page is no longer necessarily considered an ultimate authority.

Nevertheless, the world of other media can still create best-sellers, as Oprah Winfrey's reading choices do. The release of a new *Harry Potter* book can take place with the same hoopla and community participation that we observe for summer blockbuster films. Baby showers still include board books and cloth books as special gifts, and beginning readers still giggle over the creations of Dr. Seuss. While the printed word may no longer hold a monopoly as a conduit to ideas and experiences, it will continue to be an important one. Just as increased literacy changed past societies, we will change as a culture as we incorporate new ways of seeing and communicating. It is still my assumption and contention, however, that the printed page is too efficient a conduit of communication to be ignored, and too powerful a path for making connections to disappear. In addition, my pedagogical orientation calls for me to explore an experience deeply meaningful to me in the hope that communicating its essence may open it up to others. I agree with van Manen that "...pedagogy requires a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience (children's realities and lifeworlds)" (2003, p. 2). As he also notes, "Aren't the most captivating stories exactly those which help us to understand better what is most common, most taken-for-granted, and what concerns us most ordinarily and directly?" (2003, p. 19). Just as fiction can give us stories that captivate us by illuminating our ordinary concerns, phenomenological inquiry can allow us to look at what we take for granted in a new way.

As I moved through the investigation of the phenomenon, I identified and bracketed other assumptions. Some were about the value of literacy, some were about people I perceived as readers and non-readers, and some were about what it means to be

oneself authentically. Certainly, new challenges to my usual way of thinking emerged, and I stayed aware of the need to take care to address them clearly and honestly.

And the whole trick consists in this—to give free rein to the seeing eye and to bracket the references which go beyond the “seeing” and are entangled with the seeing, along with the entities which are supposedly given and thought along with the “seeing,” and finally, to bracket what is read into them through the accompanying reflections. (Husserl, 1964/1990, p. 50)

I hope that that my window was clear enough to allow me a lucid view of the phenomenon, and that I accomplished the bracketing necessary to ensure that it was not merely a mirror, as well as to keep me open to what my participants see. Certainly, I was given new perspectives from all who participated with me in examining the experience of self- construction through fiction.

Speaking and Being through Story

While we engage with the world in a different way through fiction, it is nevertheless a way that promotes concerned being-toward. Anton characterizes speech as “...not a transmission from one mind to another. It is, on the contrary, a concerned being-with-others-being toward the event horizon which is unfolding through and around us” (2001, p. 106). The type of speech, and the conversation we share with the authors of books and the characters in them, take on the characteristics of concerned being-toward. We share space with the authors, the characters, and others who read the same books. We judge their actions, look for answers to the questions they raise, and empathize with their emotions. These emotional connections also allow us to construct an understanding of ourselves and our own lived worlds.

Feelings and emotions speak to me about what matters in a nontheoretical non-intellectual manner; they disclose a valued world [and] a valuing body. In summary, emotions are not simply inner states which I express

outwardly, but rather, they are intentional tissues through which world [and] self are concernfully disclosed and tended. (Anton, 2001, p. 42)

In books, the language of speech becomes written, and we experience these conversations through the symbolic representation of words we use daily. “No one would dare to declare incorrect, let alone reject as useless, the identification of language as audible utterance of inner emotions, as human activity, as a representation by image and by concept” (Heidegger, 1971/2001b, p. 191). While books exist in a symbolic world, we make inferences from them in the “real” one. If Sara Crewe can make friends and retain her identity through telling stories, perhaps I can use storytelling to introduce and explain myself to those around me. If the March girls can give up their Christmas treats to help a struggling family, perhaps I can look at how I handle my own obligations to those who do not share my privileges. We make meaning from fiction in the lives we live daily.

“Phenomenology proceeds by ‘seeing,’ clarifying, and determining meaning, and by distinguishing meanings” (Husserl, 1964/1990, p. 46). Where do the meanings we make from observation converge with those we make from reading? “The strength of a great literary novel is that it provides us with a valuable and powerful human experience” (van Manen, 1985, p. 181). When we take meanings from narrative into the core of our being, story becomes something beyond mere entertainment or communication. “In the beautiful presented in nature and art, we experience this convincing illumination of truth and harmony, which compels the admission: ‘This is true’” (Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 15). Story can be a conduit for meaning and for transformation; story gives us tools for constructing meaning. “Exploration, description, revelation are at the heart of story, as they are at the heart of authentic or vital lives” (Metzger, 1992, p. 53). These elements are at the heart of phenomenology as well. Story leads us to truth.

“Truth is the unconcealedness of that which is as something that is. Truth is the truth of Being. Beauty does not occur alongside and apart from this truth. When truth sets itself into the work, it appears” (Heidegger, 1971/2001c, p. 79). We can grasp “that which is” through our daily lives, and we can also find “that which is” revealed to us in fiction, where truth and being are entwined through art and artifice, but reveal themselves through art and artifice as well. “Art lets truth originate” (Heidegger, p. 75).

Truth, being, and care are intertwined elements contained in Heidegger’s concept of *Alēthia*. He speaks of the “‘definition’ of truth as disclosedness and disclosing” (1953/1996, p. 202), and goes on to say that “*Disclosedness* in general belongs essentially to the constitution of being of *Da-sein*. It comprehends the totality of the structure of being that has become explicit through the phenomenon of care” (p. 203). Just as we can come to truth through the disclosedness of phenomenological investigation, we can come to truth in reading with care and attention.

Only if you do take the time for faithful perceiving, for careful attending, will the work become significant enough for you to elaborate on what you see and hear within your own experience, make new associations, find new allusions and new openings, come more and more in touch with your own realities. (Greene, 1981/2001e, p. 46)

The truths we discover or disclose through fiction are those around which we can begin to build our lives, creating ourselves as embodied exemplars of the truths we have discerned. “Human embodiment...is, fundamentally, a ‘making-room-for’” (Anton, 2001, p. 17). As we read, we continually make room for what we learn, and find that this is not a finite process; we always have room in our being to incorporate truth, art, and beauty.

Discovering the Worlds of Others and Ourselves

“Humans, as embodied beings, are self-surpassing, transcending activities of Earth; they are sites of perpetual decompression into lived-through world-experience” (Anton, 2001, p. 19). Books become sites for such transcendence, as well as apertures for decompression into experience.

Various phenomenal fields (i.e., world-experience profiles) are made possible given Earth’s internal negations: fields of action, fields of perception, fields of emotion, fields of imagination, fields of speech, fields of thought. In all of these fields, we find that which matters to us, entities and events over which we are concerned. (Anton, 2001, p. 24)

We also find every one of these phenomenal fields in books; our experience of the books we read creates them for us. Books hone our perceptions, animate our imaginations, inspire a multiplicity of emotions, affect our thinking, and move us to action through the power of language. We find entities that concern us and these concerns transfer into our daily lives; we live through these experiences and make meaning from them. “We dwell in contact with more than our own bodies” (Anton, 2001, p. 33). We dwell also in our imaginative presence, which is informed by both our bodies and our minds.

The lived-body’s powers for manifesting world-profiles and phenomenal fields...are socially orchestrated and regulated, meaning that a layer of selfhood inheres in the appropriateness and/or acceptability of certain world-experience involvements and comprehensions. Note how this is quite distinct from the sheer “unavailability” of a given world-profile to a given intentional thread. A child may desire to “touch” the moon, for example, but the moon is not available for that intentional thread. (Anton, 2001, p. 59)

The world of fiction, in contrast, expands the intentional threads available to us. In experiencing the world through fiction, we might be able to touch the moon, or at least engage in experiences that might not be available to us in other ways. Fiction subverts our usual way of being-in-the-world, and yet enriches it. In our daily lives, experiences

and ways of understanding available to us are limited by our culture, our geographical placement, our socioeconomic class, and a myriad of other elements that define and constrain us as social beings and as selves seeking authenticity. Anton goes on to observe:

In summary, although humans have various intentional powers for world [and] self comprehension, these powers are thoroughly socially orchestrated and regulated; certain modes of intentional contact are legitimated and sanctified, while others are forcefully denied and shunned. (2001, p. 60)

We can perceive the effects of such sanctification and shunning as they are experienced in other cultures and other times, moving our possibilities for intention into a larger arena. We can move outside of the constraints of our daily lives to experience differing points of view, to transcend our own set of daily experiences by appropriating those of others and learning from them. This learning becomes part of our own personal meaning-making and self-development. Profiles of different worlds become available to us; we begin to comprehend them through reading and reflection, and we incorporate the meanings we have made and the understanding we have developed into our own intentional threads. We are no longer restricted to being-in-the-world(s) into which we have been thrown, but now have a vast number of additional worlds available to us. Through such disclosure, such opening up of the world, we move from unconsidered, inauthentic existence with narrow opportunities for discovery and self-discovery to persons who have the whole world open to them and who can move within those worlds with concerned care.

Discovering is a way of being-in-the-world. Taking care of things, whether in circumspection or in looking in a leisurely way, discovers innerworldly beings. The latter become what is discovered. They are “true” in a secondary sense. Primarily “true,” that is, discovering, is *Da-*

sein. Truth in the secondary sense does not mean to be discovering (discovery), but to be discovered (discoveredness). (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 203)

Books become gateways into both inner and outer worlds. We travel through these gateways, both discovering and being discovered. “Every work leaves the person who responds to it a certain leeway, a space to be filled in by himself” (Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 26). We learn that we are not the only ones who have undergone certain types of experiences and take comfort in not being alone. We have our eyes opened to ways in which we ourselves behave that can be hurtful to others and become more sensitized to how we conduct ourselves. “*We gather other people’s experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves*” (van Manen, 2003, p. 62). We enter into an imaginary universe and observe connections we haven’t made previously, and transport those insights into our own worldview. “As we come to terms with lived-through world-experience we accomplish selfhood... and so disclose and inscribe a concerning self” (Anton, 2001, p. 91). We turn from the mirror to the window and back again.

Examining Self and Fiction

It is a truth almost universally acknowledged that reading influences who we become. Why, otherwise, would the ability to read still be such a focus in our educational establishments? Why do we continue to insist that students develop at least some familiarity with the literature we consider important, however we define our indispensable canon? Even as we acknowledge this power of fiction, consciously or unconsciously, our society makes few overt connections between what we read and who we are. We do very little to support any understanding of how such a symbiotic

relationship works. There are exceptions, such as the conservative pundit William Bennett, who has promoted collections of stories designed to build children's characters by touting what he has identified as virtues, as well as those who assert that reading the *Harry Potter* series of books can lead youngsters to the perdition of believing in magic. A phenomenological inquiry into the experience of using fiction for self-creation can produce some illuminating and interesting insights into the ways we can enter into being through an imaginative world. "But art is present whenever a work succeeds in elevating what it is or represents to a new configuration, a new world of its own in miniature, a new order of unity in tension" (Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 103). In the new worlds we experience, fiction reconfigures who we are and how we perceive ourselves.

The aspect of selfhood that I want to explore is that part of us that makes conscious (and perhaps unconscious) choices about the ways in which we conduct ourselves, interact with others, and move in the world. It is the element of our being that holds our views of ourselves as possessing particular characteristics and chooses what we want for others to view as characteristic of us. It is the self connected with being-in-the-world. "Existentially, selfhood is only to be found in the authentic potentiality-of-being-a-self, that is, in the authenticity of the being of *Da-sein as care*" (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 296). We realize our potential selfhood through the care that we take to understand ourselves, and fiction facilitates such concernful care. Deena Metzger asserts, "The territory of the self is a vast, unexplored, and prohibited geography...One can say that one of the basic conditions of contemporary life is the unfulfilled longing of the self for itself" (1992, p. 42). Engagement with fiction is a way of uncovering oneself to oneself and others.

Each of us is an exceedingly complex being, containing so many selves that we are more like communities or large populations than single individuals. These different selves, so many of whom are unknown to us on a conscious level, are those whom we must contact as we struggle toward self-knowledge and toward a deeper and more authentic means of understanding others. They are the basis of our understanding of ourselves as well as the core from which fiction emerges. (Metzger, 1992, p. 67)

Just as the mirrors of fiction can provide self-understanding and its windows can offer understanding of others, I am pursuing such understanding through phenomenological inquiry, hoping to uncover meanings that reveal authentic selfhood and ways to take that selfhood into care.

Van Manen insists that “In order to make a beginning, the phenomenologist must ask: What human experience do I feel called upon to make topical for my investigation?” (2003, p. 41). I have chosen to explore one of the experiences I find most meaningful and sustaining to me in my own life—that of reading and, particularly, of reading fiction. I read daily—at the very least, a few chapters of a mystery before sleeping. I look forward to periods of travel, because those are spaces of time in which I permit myself to read fiction rather than works related to my dissertation. Even with the restrictions of time devoted to studies, I “sneak in” sessions of reading books that friends or family members have enjoyed recently and recommended. Before the constraints of academic reading were operative, I used to read an average of two or three books a week, particularly when I lived in cities where my commute involved long subway journeys. Books provided me with companionship when I was isolated, consolation when I was dejected, amusement when I was cheerful, and insights when I was grappling with life’s challenges. I wish to understand the way fiction has created self/selves in a deeper way, in a way that can be useful in making meaning of the experience. “A phenomenological question must not

only be made clear, understood, but also ‘lived’ by the researcher” (van Manen, 2003, p. 44). I live the experience of engaging deeply with fiction to make meaning of my own life every day. My task is to clarify the experience for others and to make it meaningful for them.

Metaphor, Language, and Being

My training in seeing life and lived experiences through the metaphoric lens of fiction has provided a good background in addressing the phenomenological task of teasing out the metaphors that can express the essence of a phenomenon. “By way of metaphor, language can take us beyond the content of the metaphor toward the original region where language speaks through silence” (van Manen, 2003, p. 49). The metaphor of novels also moves us beyond mere content into understanding and connection to the universality of experience, even in lifeworlds that may be very different from our own. What we experience in novels is a call to the silence of our being, as well as a recognition of the silent core of other beings. “Whoever wants to become acquainted with the world...should listen to the language spoken by the things in their lifeworlds, to what things mean in this world” (van Manen, 2003, p. 112). We move through language into meaning.

“The phenomenological method consists of the ability, or rather the art of being sensitive—sensitive to the subtle undertones of language, to the way language speaks when it allows the things themselves to speak” (van Manen, 2003, p. 111). Writers embody this sort of sensibility, allowing stories to speak to us, using language to reach through to our understanding. As we move beyond the requirements of simple reportage into a realm where literature is rich in metaphor and imagery, where language is polished

and carefully tended, our experience of the lifeworld depicted is also enriched. A well-written story uses its language to draw us into that lifeworld and to persuade us to dwell in it fully. The author creates a reality through language that opens up the world of the things and characters described. Books where this sensitivity is displayed are the ones most likely to call to us.

“This means that an authentic speaker must be a true listener, able to attune to the deep tonalities of language that usually fall out of the accustomed range of hearing, to be able to listen to the way the things of the world speak to us” (van Manen, 2003, p. 111). Both writers and readers must exercise this same attunement in order to appreciate fully what the books with which we interact may have to say to us. We are not hearing only the voices of the authors, but the varied voices of the characters, and perhaps our own voices in answer. We “hear” also the settings, the lived worlds of the characters, the situations in which they find themselves, and must listen carefully to draw meaning from these elements. We do not listen to a fictional conversation or narrative in the same way we interact in our daily lives. Instead, we take note of what is said from a perspective that is at once removed and engaged, in the same way that we explore a phenomenon as both subject and object. “The insight into the essence of a phenomenon involves a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of the meaning of the lived experience” (van Manen, 2003, p. 77).

Reading and Understanding

My book group experience provides an example of how we engage in the same kind of activity for understanding fiction. In addition to reading, we prepare for our discussions by reflecting on what we’ve read, by drawing some conclusions about what

the selection has said about the human condition, by clarifying our assertions with examples from our own lives, and by imagining how we can communicate our insights and conclusions to other members of the group in a way that conveys what it has meant to us.

In some cases, the way we incorporate what we have learned from the book becomes an almost unconscious process, something that we recognize only when we confront an old situation in a new way. We may have more patience with a spouse, inspired by compassion brought about by a deeper understanding of a situation they have faced, gained by witnessing a character's way of dealing with a similar situation. We may allow ourselves to try a new way of doing something because we've found a different approach to be successful for another character. In the group setting, we may have our minds and perceptions changed yet again because of an interpretation or a sharing of experience from another group member. Our disbanded book group reconvened briefly to discuss Jonathan Safran Foer's novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and several of us had the experience of coming to the table with one mindset and leaving with another. All of us read the same material, but interpreted it through the lenses of our own experiences and proclivities. Ultimately, however, the shared experience of reading gave us a vocabulary to explore and reconcile our differences, and we grew and became more ourselves through our sharing the lived world the author created.

Van Manen notes (as I shared earlier), "Of course, we need to acknowledge that the epistemological objectives of the discourse of behavioral science differ from those of aesthetic discourse" (2003, p. 114). In exploring this phenomenon, I attempt to bring the two together—correlating the nexus of understanding humans with the ways that esthetic

entities engender that understanding. “If we really have had a genuine experience of art, then the world has become both brighter and less burdensome” (Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 26). Perhaps an understanding of what fiction can contribute to our engagement with our lived worlds and our making meaning of our lives can add to such illumination, as I pursue the question: **What is the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction?**

Methodological Framework

I have been drawn to phenomenology as a methodology for deep engagement with a question since I first encountered it in my early doctoral classes. As I have mentioned, part of the appeal could be the ways in which a quest for the essence of a phenomenon achieves clarity through our engagement with language and thematic identification, and how that process resembles the practice of making meaning from what we have read. In both cases, we analyze a text, but not from a technical point of view. Rather, we connect to concrete experience, and consider the ways in which language is used to convey reality. Thematic affinities deepen our understanding of what we have encountered as we enfold what we have come to understand into our own cognition. As van Manen observes, “The conversation has a hermeneutic thrust; it is oriented to sense-making and interpreting of the notion that drives or stimulates the conversation” (2003, p. 98). Whether that conversation takes place in talking through a mutual exploration of a phenomenon or in reading the pages of a novel, we are engaged in sense-making.

The first definition of “phenomenon” I find in my dictionary is “any fact, circumstance, or experience that is apparent to the senses and that can be scientifically described or appraised” (McKechnie, 1983, pp. 1345-1356). While my orientation is

qualitative rather than the quantitative outlook generally ascribed to science, I certainly seek to describe something that is experienced in a sensory way. As I delve a bit more into the derivation of the word, I am surprised and gratified to discover that the Greek source of phenomenon is *phainesthai*, which also gives us the word “fantasy” (Barnhart, 1988, p. 786). We can observe and sense the phenomenon that we choose to explore, but we also apply our imagination to the ways in which we interpret it. Husserl says, “For a consideration of essence, perception and imagination are to be treated exactly alike; the same essence can equally well be ‘seen’ in either, / or abstracted from either...” (1990/1964, pp. 53-54). For my study, both perception and imagination are necessary to elicit the essence of the experience. A phenomenological approach gives me the ability to take advantage of what each offers.

Van Manen provides an indispensable description of the essential elements in conducting phenomenological inquiry, which serves as the framework for my approach to examining the lived experience of creating a self through reading fiction. He describes these activities as follows:

- (1) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
- (2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
- (3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
- (4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- (5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
- (6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (van Manen, 2003, pp. 30-31)

These fundamental actions have created the structure I have used to explore my research question, and to pursue a deepened understanding of what is essential in coming into being through books and what it means to become oneself through reading.

Turning to a Phenomenon Which Seriously Interests Us and Commits Us to the World

Who would I have become without reading? This is a question for which I have yet to discover an answer, and it is difficult for me to envision who that person, that self, might have been if she had not had access to books. I cannot remember any time in my life when reading wasn't important to me. Reading has been the way I've made sense of my life and the world around me; it has crystallized and contextualized my own experience. Van Manen talks about "a being given-over to some quest, a true task, a deep questioning..." (2003, p. 31). The task that calls to me, that demands my questioning, is that of understanding the ways in which we make meaning in our lives and develop our sense of ourselves through literature. I have uncovered that "turning" in Chapter One as I have considered how reading has been crucial to my own evolution into authentic selfhood, that is, a self who has come into being reflectively.

My interest is in the place that our reading of fiction, of works focused on imaginative experience, has in our self-development. I believe Gadamer's assertion that "Aesthetic experience is not just one kind of experience among others, but represents the essence of experience *per se*" (1960/2002, p. 70). I seek to explore the sort of aesthetic reading and meaning-making described by Louise Rosenblatt:

In aesthetic reading, we respond to the very story or poem that we are evoking during the transaction with the text. In order to shape the work, we draw on our reservoir of past experience with people and the world, our past inner linkage of words and things, our past encounters with spoken or written texts. We listen to the sound of the words in the inner ear; we lend our sensations, or emotions, our sense of being alive, to the new experience which, we feel, corresponds to the text. We participate in the story, we identify with the characters, we share their conflicts and their feelings. (2005, p. 75)

I seek to link our reading and our self-formation just as a phenomenological orientation links words and experiences, and to understand our participation in our narrative engagement with our own being. As Gadamer says, “Reading with understanding is always a kind of reproduction, performance, and interpretation” (1960/2002, p. 160). What do we reproduce when we become ourselves out of our own aesthetic dwelling? What do we see as our performance when we are involved in connecting fictional and daily worlds? What interpretation is necessary to our becoming?

Investigating Experience as We Live It Rather than as We Conceptualize It

“What first of all characterizes phenomenological research is that it always begins in the lifeworld” (van Manen, 2003, p. 7). For me, reading fiction is closer to living than to thinking; we enter story as a lived and embodied experience, albeit a vicarious one. As I enter into conversation with participants, I do not proceed as if I have theory to be proved or disproved, but rather must be open to hearing what others have to say in a deep and thoughtful way. Van Manen describes lived experience as “the breathing of meaning” (2003, p. 36). The conversations in which we participate create the life breath of the meaning we take from what we have read. As we speak, we embody again the lifeworlds we have entered, re-forging the connections we have made therein. As we recall what has happened to us in those worlds, and how we have emerged changed, we once again feel the emotional pull of the characters who engage us and the physical qualities of the setting. The description that we develop through the recollection of details and of what the experience felt like becomes the source for my search for points of connection. As van Manen insists, “The object of phenomenological description is not to

develop theoretical abstractions that remain severed from the concrete reality of lived experience” (2003, p. 119), but to make that experience visible to others.

I must take this “renewed contact with original experience” (van Manen, 2003, p. 31), and delve into it to uncover what participants are saying. One way of delving is to examine the etymology of words that are used, particularly words that appear again and again in conversations. “Etymology” comes to us from the Greek *etymologíā*, from *étymon*, the true sense of a word based on its origin (Barnhart, 1988, p. 346).

Understanding the origins and permutations of words that are used repeatedly can provide insight into the essential character of the experience by connecting to overarching concepts. We look for the truth of the words used, the meanings attached to them, and the cognates that give us additional shadings of meaning, which can uncover depths of hidden associations with the experience itself.

I know what this experience has been for me, but I cannot operate under any expectation that it has been the same for others. Narrative accounts of how others have come to selfhood through reading, and have used reading to make sense of their worlds, are also important in understanding the experience as it is lived. I have come across multiple examples of these narratives, often conveyed by those who went on to become authors of fiction. Concentrating on how the experience is lived rather than conceived will allow me to identify the commonalities and persistent thematic elements that point me toward the essence of the experience. “In other words, a good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience—is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience” (van Manen, 2003, p. 27). I have begun to examine and uncover my phenomenon of reading fiction through a variety of

sources in Chapter Two and I continue that examination as I engage with the participants in my study, as reflected in Chapters Four and Five, concentrating on what the lived experience has been for them and what themes emerge from their narratives.

Reflecting on the Essential Themes Which Characterize the Phenomenon

“Themes are the stars that make up the universes of meaning that we live through. By the light of these themes we can navigate and explore such universes” (van Manen, 2003, p. 90). Themes illuminate our understanding just as stars may illuminate our nights. Uncovering thematic statements can be accomplished through several approaches identified by van Manen: a wholistic approach that captures fundamental meaning and/or main significance; a selective or highlighting approach that identifies statements or phrases that seem to be particularly essential or revealing; and a detailed, line-by-line approach that examines what each sentence reveals about the phenomenon (2003, pp. 92-93). “Reflecting on lived experience then becomes reflectively analyzing the structural or thematic aspects of that experience” (van Manen, 2003, p. 78). As I re-lect, I turn and turn again to the meanings behind the words, the threads that I find woven in the words that constitute a structure of the connotations of the lived experience. Van Manen describes theme as “the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand” (2003, p. 87). For me, that form takes on the shape of an image or phrase that expresses something I find revealed in the conversations after a wholistic reading and rereading of the transcriptions—words or ideas that recur and illuminate essential elements of becoming through books. Van Manen says, “The essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon” (2003, p. 10). As I consider

the texts developed from our conversations, I seek the universal within the particular, endeavoring to accomplish what Husserl describes. “We inspect them, and while inspecting them we can observe their essence, their constitution, their intrinsic character, and we can make our speech conform in a pure measure to what is ‘seen’ in its full clarity” (1964/1990, p. 24).

Again, the challenge is openness, not expecting confirmation, but truly hearing and seeing what actually emerges within conversations. To be sure, even in my preliminary conversations, some themes emerged—reading as escape, being nourished by reading, having opportunities to “try on” alternative selves. I continue to discern such themes in the ways in which they actually appear, rather than taking my own assumptions for granted. Utilizing all these practices requires careful attention and close engagement with the conversations and reflections participants provide, as well as writing and rewriting what I perceive from the reflections that emerge.

Describing the Phenomenon through the Art of Writing and Rewriting

Van Manen asserts, “Yet for the human sciences, and specifically for hermeneutic phenomenological work, writing is closely fused into the research activity and reflection itself” (2003, p. 125). In many ways, this task can be the most enjoyable and engaging, yet still the most challenging. The conversations provide rich material for description, as I unpack what is said to tease out meaning. In my writing, the process is quite circular—I write, reflect, read, ponder, rewrite, reread, rewrite, and begin again. I have found that it takes the first round or two of writing to bring thematic elements more deeply into focus, and to uncover the ideas that need more examination within phenomenological and pedagogical contexts to develop the essence of the experience. Re-turning to the words

that have been written or spoken allows me to make additional corrections, or sparks a path of inquiry to explore. The process is one of accretion.

According to van Manen, "...in phenomenological human science the process of writing involves more than merely communicating information" (2003, p. 112). There must be meaning behind the communication, a connection of the soul-work of selfhood to the storying. Gadamer observes, "This is the reason why understanding is always more than re-creating someone else's meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one's own thinking on the subject" (1960/2002, p. 375). My questioning to open such possibilities takes place not only when I am in conversation with participants, but also as I reflect upon these conversations and take hold of what is meaningful for my self and the story I wish to tell.

One concern is the difficulty of knowing when to step off the carousel of revision; there always seems to be something that could be added, something I had forgotten that resurfaces, or another quotation that can illuminate my meaning. Writing and rewriting form the pathway to understanding by forcing us to focus our thoughts and to confront them critically when we see them set down. "Writing fixes thoughts on paper. It externalizes what in some sense is internal..." (van Manen, 2003, p. 125). The process of writing and rewriting allows us to delve more deeply into understanding the phenomenon with each iteration.

How do I know when I have reached the essence of the experience? As van Manen notes, "The object of human science research is essentially a linguistic project: to make some aspect of our lived world, of our lived experience, reflectively understandable and intelligible" (2003, p. 125). At some point, I must have confidence that I have

uncovered enough to be comprehensible, to reveal meaning, and to lead to new understanding that can enhance pedagogical engagements.

Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Pedagogical Relation to the Phenomenon

“In other words, as we speak or write (produce text), we need to see that the textuality of our text is also a demonstration of the way we stand pedagogically in life” (van Manen, 2003, p. 138). A pedagogical orientation is, in some sense, the whole reason for engaging with this phenomenon and for producing this study, the text that communicates where I stand pedagogically. In examining the experience of creating self through reading, what can I contribute that could influence the ways in which children are taught? The focus of Chapter Five is to address the insights that have been gained through conversations, textual development, rewriting—and centering my attention on the implications of the ways in which the lived experience of imaginative engagement with literature allows us to become ourselves.

My orientation is one that still comes down strongly on the side of literature being important. I acknowledge the danger and don’t want “to become enchanted with narcissistic reflections or self-indulgent preoccupations or to fall back onto taxonomic concepts or abstracting theories” (van Manen, 2003, p. 33). While I am engaged by my own interest in this question, I must not lose sight of what it could mean for others, and particularly for educators and students. I do believe that such understanding can point to ways in which literature can be enriching, and that pathways can be identified that make it part of a journey to wholeness in a curriculum that embraces the entire individual.

I would like to see a real grappling with literary lifeworlds and our dwelling within them become part of the classroom environment described by bell hooks as

“learning communities where everyone’s voice can be heard, their presence recognized and valued” (1994, p. 185). We become ourselves through literature, learners through deep discussion of it, and community members through our sharing of what we have experienced. As we gaze into mirrors to look at our own souls, through windows to connect to the being of others, education can open the doors that allow us to meet and learn from one another. Together, the parts of ourselves and others form the whole that can be the valued and valuing classroom.

Balancing the Research Context by Considering Parts and Whole

“To conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented” (Gadamer, 1960/2002, p. 367). Rather than an interview where I elicit a series of answers to questions, I engage in real dialogues, where I am a participant as well, always keeping in mind that we must be directed by the lived experience we are discussing. “The methodology of phenomenology requires a dialectical going back and forth among these various levels of questioning” (van Manen, 2003, p. 131). Further, Gadamer points out that “The essence of the *question* is to open up possibilities and to keep them open” (1960/2002, p. 299). Through dialogue, through conversation, through questioning, I am willing to follow the paths that open up and use them to examine the possibilities they uncover.

Gadamer notes that “The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning” (1960/2002, p. 292). It is my task to identify common meanings, but also to mold them into a meaningful text, the whole that illuminates what it comprises. Van Manen’s cautions about consistently returning to the overall study are valuable in

reminding me to keep the whole of the phenomenon in sight, and not to be diverted by details, however important they may seem. This involves stepping back and forth between my metaphors of mirrors and windows, just as we do through fiction. While the conversations are, indeed, conversations and not interviews, van Manen points out that it is my responsibility to shape what comes out of them. “The conversation has a hermeneutic thrust; it is oriented to sense-making and interpreting of the notion that drives or stimulates the conversation” (2003, p. 98).

The interplay of developing a view of the whole phenomenon while attending to the parts that compose it—the conversational descriptions of experience that are the building blocks for the edifice—draws us into the “hermeneutical principle that we can understand a detail only in terms of the whole text, and the whole only in terms of detail” (Gadamer, 1960/2002, p. 198). The cyclical nature of coming to understand the phenomenon requires us to spiral through iteration and reiteration of what is discovered and uncovered about it, moving from whole to parts and back again. For Husserl, “We understand that such a stepwise constitution is required by the very essence of the experienced object” (1964/1990, p. 11). As we shift back and forth, “...we, so to speak, pluck a universal from the phenomenon itself; it is also constituted by universalizing the object of appearance, positing a universal while gazing on it...” (Husserl, 1964/1990, p. 53). Our gaze must move from the mirror to the window, always returning to the phenomenon itself, to the conversational texts that reveal its universalities in the details.

Throughout this process, I keep these methodological guidelines in mind, and I am mindful that they don’t represent a step-by-step progression, but rather a framework

to support my coming to understanding of my chosen phenomenon. Van Manen says of hermeneutic phenomenology:

...it is a *descriptive* (phenomenological) methodology because it wants to be attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves; it is an *interpretive* (hermeneutic) methodology because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena. (2003, p. 180)

The experience of turning and re-turning, of describing and interpreting, takes me around the hermeneutic circle, and these guidelines are important for helping me to maintain my balance as I explore the question: **What is the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction?**

Expanding the Circle: My Process of Engagement

In my phenomenological investigation of the experience of constructing a sense of self through reading fiction, I engaged six participants in their reflections about the experience of reading fiction and constructing a sense of self in the process. While I selected participants who share my belief that literature is important and has been an important part of how they have come to be themselves, I sought collaborators with varied background experiences, anticipating that intrinsically differing viewpoints would be of interest as the thematic concordances evolved. I looked for a number of participants that would be manageable to engage in deep conversation and yet would provide heterogeneous viewpoints. All who agreed to undertake the conversations and writing requested were women, and gender issues came to light in the context of how literature was a support in their becoming when society and families did not sustain them.

In the way that the group evolved, heterogeneity was expressed mostly in age differences, with participants spanning a range of decades from their 20s through their

50s. I was interested in what readers of different generations would have to say about how the general culture changed between their experiences and how those changes may have affected their reading. For instance, I read Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) some years after many of my friends had read it, after the feminist movement had become part of the national landscape. While I experienced it as a rampantly sexist book, many of them who had read it previously had not questioned its attitudes toward women because those dimensions had not yet been part of their consciousness. What would the difference in experience be for one reader to encounter a book for the first time in 1977 and another reader to encounter the same book for the first time in 2007?

For example, the perspective of a young woman in her 20s, for whom we might assume feminist activism has provided a smoother path to business success, can reveal that gender issues are still active in the workplace and that strong female characters provide role models for her in coping with corporate sexism. Others of us remember the women's movement of the 1970s more directly, and our viewpoints have changed over time as we learned to critique some of the assumptions that we found in the literature of our formative years.

The experience of self-creation continues throughout a lifetime, and we are different selves at different times, yet we often have special books we return to again and again. My interest included exploring what about these books draws us back to them, how our experience changes over time, and how our selfhood is affected by them as we continue to grow and change. The same book may have one meaning to us as children, another as adolescents, and quite another as adults. Fiction calls to us and reveals us to

ourselves, but always within the context of what our life is at a particular time. Reflection on themes identified from conversations can identify the essence of the experience not dependent upon that context, and such books can indeed be meaningful to us over decades of time when they are rich enough. Readers from different generations frequently mention the same books again and again. Perhaps it is the communal sense of reading that connects—more so than one’s daily world.

Gathering Companions

I made preliminary contacts with potential participants in a few settings—through an alumnae association, my workplace, and my church, often in just speaking about my dissertation journey and mentioning the question of my investigation. Several people expressed an interest in and enthusiasm for the subject, and members of my former book group also offered to participate. I found that good friends, acquaintances, friends of friends, and even strangers reacted positively to the idea of exploring the intersection of fiction and selfhood more deeply. They cited books that had been influential in their lives and talked about the vital place of reading in their daily activities. Beyond the first enthusiasm, however, the path to identifying participants who were committed to the project was a bit more challenging.

I spoke to a number of people who initially expressed interest, and found that some of them were not really readers of fiction, but rather of nonfiction. A few were enthusiastic at first, but were unwilling or unable to schedule the time for conversations and writing. Appendix A shows the letter of invitation that I sent to potential participants, after an initial first contact, either in person or by telephone. A couple of people dropped out after considering the time requirements. The most successful recruiting activity was a

communication to the Hermes Circle, a group of University of Maryland graduate students who are also engaged in phenomenological research. Three of the six participants connected through that group; three others came from my alumnae association, book group, and work contacts. They believed that reading fiction was part of their becoming themselves, and were ready to converse more deeply about their experience. “Phenomenological engagement is always personal engagement; it is an appeal to each one of us, to how we understand things, how we stand in life, how we understand ourselves as educators, etc.” (van Manen, 2003, p. 156). Through conversing, I connected with the readers who were willing to talk about their experiences and to allow me to enter into their lifeworlds to understand what reading and selfhood have meant to them.

Conducting the Conversations

I engaged in two conversations with each participant, of approximately one and one-half to two hours’ duration each. I found that this amount of time was sufficient to allow for deep engagement with the subject, but still manageable in terms of scheduling and taking time from people’s busy lives. At the first meeting, I collected the signed consent form that was mailed out in advance for each participant (see Appendix B). In the conversations, I began to explore their experience of reading fiction with questions such as those in Appendix C, in order to open up the phenomenon. As we conversed, those questions led to additional questions from both sides, as well as narratives that expanded upon what it felt like, what the lived experience was, to become oneself through books.

Although I did not plan for this sort of consensus, it transpired that some of the participants, myself included, had grown up in environments that were abusive or unsafe,

often with alcoholism present in their families. I appreciated how honest these women were to reveal such challenges to me and to be so open about how books had been not only a means of escape from dire circumstances, but dwelling places that offered safe havens. The dimension of reading as a refuge became an important and illuminating one.

All participants were gracious enough to come to my home, where I could record the conversations in a quiet environment. I offered a collation for each session, and breaking bread together seemed to provide a comfortable environment, conducive to lively and thoughtful conversation. We were sometimes surprised at how quickly a couple of hours passed.

After each first meeting, I transcribed the audio-taped conversation and developed follow-up questions that emerged from where each conversation had led, to reflect on my own impressions, and to identify elements that called for deeper understanding. This is a methodological component that van Manen describes as such: “Once transcript themes have been identified by the researcher then these themes may become objects of reflection in follow-up hermeneutic conversation in which both the researcher and the interviewee collaborate” (2003, p. 99). This reflection and re-turning to the phenomenon became part of the thematic identification, as well as providing details of the lived experience to make that living clearer.

So a conversation is structured as a triad. There is a conversational relation between the speakers, and the speakers are involved in a conversational relation with the notion or phenomenon that keeps the personal relation of the conversation intact. (van Manen, 2003, p. 98)

The conversational relationship that developed among us indeed generated questions and additional details from each side, engaging their experience, as well as my own, of creating a sense of self through reading. While maintaining a human and

pedagogical orientation, I focused on the experience as it was lived through the body, in time and space, and in relationships. Thus, the second conversations were also opened up by questioning, providing an entry into deeper exploration of the experience.

The “procedures” of this methodology have been recognized as a project of various kinds of questioning, oriented to allow a rigorous interrogation of the phenomenon as identified at first and then cast in the reformulation of a question. (van Manen, 2003, p. 131)

I transcribed the second and group conversations as well. The experience of transcription was an interesting, albeit tremendously time-consuming one. To be able to hear the nuances of vocal tones and pauses gave an added dimension to the words themselves. I was also surprised to find, given the often grim areas under discussion, how often laughter was part of our exchanges. Transcribing set in motion my journey into the meaning of what was said as well, as I began to hear some of the same words and phrases, and to consider what the thematic implications might be for them.

After the two individual conversations, I asked participants to write a short (5-7 pages) reflective piece on a particularly significant book that they felt was most important to them—one that held meaning for them throughout their lives. I provided an essay about my lifelong relationship with *A Little Princess*, which I shared with participants to serve as a model. I also asked them to write a short autobiography, providing an example of my own, and these self-descriptive pieces appear in Chapter Four. Their writing was often intricate and beautiful, and again astonishing in its honesty and frankness. “Writing fixes thought on paper. It externalizes what in some sense is internal; it distances us from our immediate lived involvements with the things of our world” (van Manen, 2003, p. 125). The written pieces added even more dimensions, illuminating the ways in which we

perceive ourselves as changing and how our perceptions of books that are lifelong favorites and what we take from them reflect those changes.

Finally, I had a chance to explore interaction among the participants by gathering for a final shared conversation. Because of the challenges of coordinating multiple busy schedules, four participants were able to take part. In this group context, we explored further the ways selfhood was uncovered throughout our individual conversations and in the written texts I had received. The dynamics of discussing experiences in a shared environment added dimensions to our conversations as participants built on one another's narratives, asked new questions, and connected through our mutual love of the printed word. Again, we shared a meal, and the conversation continued to be lively beyond the formal recorded session regarding my research focus. All of these activities elicited a number of thematic possibilities and a number of insights into the ways we connect books with ourselves and our sense of being, and it became my task to consider them within a phenomenological orientation and to make meaning of what had been said and written.

Analyzing the Conversations

Starting from the beginning conversations, through subsequent individual and group contributions, it has been my task to search for the essential themes through a process of hermeneutic analysis. In developing transcripts, reflecting upon what they reveal, I look for interstices of experience, understanding, and meaning. "*In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is*" (van Manen, 2003, p. 107). These aspects or qualities are divulged through particularities of individual experiences that illuminate commonalities.

While uncovering those commonalities is important, it is also important not to lose sight of the fact that what we are examining is lived experience, not an abstraction. "...the relationship of life to experience is not that of a universal to a particular. Rather, the unity of experience as determined by its intentional content stands in an immediate relationship to the whole, to the totality of life" (Gadamer, 1960/2002, p. 68). These movements between particular and universal, between individual experiences and totality of life, require the reflection, writing, and rewriting that allow me to develop an understanding of what has been said. "So when we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience" (van Manen, 2003, p. 79). The spiraling process of conversation, reflection, writing, analysis, and rewriting illuminates those experiential structures.

As I have questioned, conversed, transcribed, reflected, written, rewritten, and pondered, themes have emerged. The vivid descriptions of self-storying through reading have been incorporated into the analyses I offer in Chapter Four, while the pedagogical insights revealed are shared in Chapter Five. I have associated the back-and-forth movement between the particular and the universal of phenomenological inquiry with our negotiation between the quotidian and imaginative worlds, characterizing them as liminal, or threshold, spaces that we readers cross and re-cross. As we learn to dwell in these spaces, we use our lived experiences in becoming the beings we have aspired to become, authentic selves who have used fiction as part of our reflective practice.

Although it is obvious that human science discourse is not the same project as poetry, it is not entirely wrong to say that phenomenological research/writing also requires a high level of reflectivity, an attunement to lived experience, and a certain patience or time commitment. (van Manen, 2003, p. 114)

In taking on this task, I have committed to engaging seriously with a phenomenon that I believe to be important, to investigating it with a focus on lived experience, and to accomplishing the multiple iterations necessary to develop themes that elucidate meanings. I am willing to do this because I am dedicated to this inquiry of understanding the phenomenological question: **What is the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction?**

**CHAPTER FOUR:
STANDING AT THE THRESHOLD: STORYING THE SELF INTO SENTIENCE**

We NAME ourselves
We change our names We question our assumptions
The words of authors *spea*k our lives to us

We speak most deeply in our **silence** We keep our **secrets**
We visit the **sacred** grove, where the *wise women dwell*
Turning from my **mirror**, I see you through my **window**
I meet you and we come together across the **threshold** of becoming
We are VALIDATED We are VINDICATED We find our own way
Into a *safe* space (McShane, 2010)

[Sensing] is anything that breaks into one's everyday mode of perception, that causes a break in one's defenses and resistance, anything that takes one from one's habitual grounding, causes a shift in perception. This shift in perception deepens the way we see concrete objects and people; the senses become so acute and piercing that we can see through things, view events in depth, a piercing that reaches the underworld (the realms of the soul). As we plunge vertically, the break, with its accompanying new seeing, makes us pay attention to the soul, and we are thus carried into awareness—an experiencing of soul (Self). (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 61)

As for the notion of the narrative unity of a life, it must be seen as an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience. It is precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively, after the fact, prepared to take as provisional and open to revision any figure of emplotment borrowed from fiction or from history. (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 162)

The Threshold Beckons: Conversing in Liminal Space

Through the participation of the women who entered into conversation with me, I explored the question: **What is the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction?** The conversations became spaces of sharing the ways in which stories brought us to our own sense of being, providing the kind of break in our everyday perception that Anzaldúa describes. We talked of the new seeing that derived from our reading and how that allowed us to see ourselves and the worlds around us in expanded ways. I am deeply appreciative of the trust that all the participants extended to me. Many

had very difficult stories to tell, and my own experiences made it easy to empathize with their struggles for autonomy in the face of opposition or abuse. Acknowledging the thorny paths they have trod, I must also express my admiration for the lives they have constructed as they have faced their challenges. They are caring mothers, compassionate teachers, eager communicators, and passionate artists, who continue to engage deeply with life in their everyday whirl of activities, their educational pursuits, and their enduring love for reading.

Much of phenomenological literature recognizes the power of personal narrative, in the sense of creating our own stories about our lived experiences, as a tool for learning and making meaning. For all of us, important stories are not only our own, but those we acquire and take possession of through reading fiction. "*Fiction is made of our experiences of the lives of imagined characters in action*" (van Manen, 1985, p. 178). We use these experiences in the emplotment of our own lives and incorporate them, ready for revision as Ricoeur notes, into our own personal narratives. The storying moves back and forth, across the threshold of quotidian reality and the fictional world, across our experiences and those of others.

This threshold is an important place for us as we weave the threads of our becoming into the tapestry of our lives, as we situate ourselves across becoming and being. As we engage in conversation, words that start with the prefix "Trans" keep appearing, over and over, in many contexts: we are transported, we are transformed (and formed), we transgress, we transmit and receive transmissions. All of these exchanges carry the element of movement across, from one place to another, from one being to another, from one outlook to another, from one lived space to another. Throughout our

engagement with the question of living the experience of creating self through fiction, that movement across appears again and again. It becomes apparent that those of us deeply committed to making meaning through fiction live at a threshold much of the time, whether it is one between reality and fiction, ourselves and others, past and present, or our they-selves and authentic selves.

“Threshold” derives from the Old English *thærscwold*, meaning doorsill, point of entering (Barnhart, 1988, p. 1137). The dictionary also notes its psychological sense of a point at which stimuli can be perceived or differentiated. The threshold may be a point of entry, but it can be an exit as well; our conversations often make clear that both activities take place simultaneously as we read. The point of perception is also an apt description. As we cross the thresholds of daily life/fiction, self/other, reading/doing, our perceptions are changed and our thoughts are differentiated. We begin to perceive and conceive our own being as we read. As I explore the themes that emerge from our conversations, I encounter that liminal space again and again, where we are not so much either/or, but rather both/and.

As we create a sense of self through fiction, we are habitually at that threshold of across. Through the mirror of fiction, we look across into our own souls and being-in-the-world. Through the windows of fiction, we look across into the lifeworlds of the Other. We move across the threshold of fiction, into other worlds and back into our own. Our journey across, our negotiation of those both/and worlds, brings us to self-knowledge, self-reflection, and across to the choices that make us who we are. In this chapter, I seek to illuminate the essence of the experience of self-construction through reading fiction in examining the thematic aspects that appear throughout our conversations. I stand at the

threshold of self-storying and find myself invited to cross over into the storying of others, to grapple with the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction.

Fabulations and Experiences: Conversing as Readers

The women who enter into conversation with me speak their lived stories in the metaphor of narrated stories; they use fictional sources to name, understand, and make meaning of what has happened to them throughout their lives. I listen, respond, ask questions, request clarifications or more details. I tell my story as well, and we laugh at common foibles or commiserate over similar difficulties. We come to know one another through our shared discourse, listening and learning from one another—reaching across. I pore through the words we generate to seek new seeing, looking for the metaphoric essence of what we have said. Van Manen notes:

Making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery, or disclosure—grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of “seeing” meaning. (2003, p. 79)

I look to discover what my companions in my research have said, to understand what they have disclosed, in hopes of insight through which I can invent thematic formulations that make meaning visible.

Van Manen also cautions, “All recollections of experiences, descriptions of experiences, taped interviews about experiences, or transcribed conversations about experiences are already transformations of those experiences” (2003, p. 54). We are in the world of “Trans” again! Acknowledging that our conversations, reflections, and recollections move each of our experiences from a lived event to a tale told about it, we nevertheless believe that our time together can produce a vision of what we have lived

that can be perceived by others. We are readers/speakers who stand on the threshold of communication—of ingesting/telling tales/occurrences.

The women who share my journey are readers and writers, tellers of tales and ‘bookworms’ who consume them. Each has provided the biographical information below, emphasizing what they choose to highlight in presenting themselves. All names are pseudonyms of their own choosing.

Anne learned to read when she was six and hasn’t stopped since, although she managed to get her nose out of books long enough to acquire two advanced degrees, two careers, one husband and one child. She is currently a storyteller for both adults and children. When she taught elementary school, she read to her students daily. When she taught at the college level, she required her students to tell stories. She is currently working on her Ph.D.

When **Clarissa** leaves the house, she checks to see that she has remembered to bring her keys, wallet, cell phone, and a good read. Since Clarissa is nearing the end of her graduate studies, she isn’t able to curl up with a book as often as she would like, but has discovered that being read to on audio-book is the next best thing. Clarissa occasionally procrastinates by recalling her favorite childhood books and tracking them down online. Growing up in rural Pennsylvania, Clarissa was taught for several years by imported Glaswegian nuns who introduced her to British crime thrillers, Shakespeare, and the “massive” two-story library in the large town 40 miles away. When she has the time and money, Clarissa tosses two sets of clothes into her backpack, stuffs in as many books as she can carry without tipping over, and wanders, tasting new languages, and finding new places to read in and about.

Early childhood bedtime stories instilled a love of fiction and reading in **Deborah**. For the past 40 years, she has used reading to escape the constraints imposed by an authoritarian father and, most recently, the humdrum of soccer motherhood. She has carried on family tradition by continuing the bedtime stories with her own three sons, and has been rewarded by their becoming compassionate, capable, moral young men with a love of learning and of life. Her retirement plans include lying around eating bonbons while reading whatever tickles her fancy.

Katherine spends most of her time surfing the digital information highway, letting the waves take her to new and interesting learning experiences. In her childhood, every summer was spent with weekly visits to the library, where Katherine would often come away with ten books to be consumed before the next visit. She has fond memories of reading from an early age, and her father is always quick to remind her that even before she could read she was tricking her grandparents into thinking she could by reciting the Dr. Seuss stories he read to her every night, which she had memorized. She is still seeking her ideal job as a professional reader but will maintain her position as a server administrator until fate steers her in another direction.

Mariah, a dance educator and choreographer, is an avid, life-long reader. Her search for personal identity and meaning has often been rooted in great books, from the well-known classics of Western culture, to the contemporary voices of female authors, and writers from the post-colonial world. A sense of camaraderie with the authors of favored books led her to discover a compelling voice within. As a choreographer, literally “a writer with dance,” she has publicly presented a series of original dance works. By engaging the parallel processes of creative dance and creative writing, Mariah has

inspired a generation of young dancers to give form to their own expressive voices. She continues to read, mornings and evenings, and finds, among life's great pleasures, a bit of fine chocolate with a really great book!

Ms. Wordsmith fell in love with words and reading at a very early age and read her first poem to [her] classmates in 2nd grade. Her mother gifted her with a used Underwood typewriter and a ream of paper at age 11, and she spun many stories populated with plucky female heroes roaming free in the world. Words have been her solace, her adventure, her companions through life, and a source of livelihood. She worked in publishing and journalism, as a clerk in the original B. Dalton bookstore, as a drafter of proposals for government and non-profits. Currently, she reaches out to the world with words from a blog. Her reading choices have been singular and eclectic. As a young woman involved in political and social causes, she virtually ceased reading novels in favor of nonfiction books about societal issues. Now, as she grows older, she is drawn again to fiction, especially some of the classics missed earlier, to savor and to share the enduring struggles and victories of individual lives played out within the contexts of their social and personal worlds.

All of these women are clearly booklovers, lifelong enthusiasts of the written word. For all of them, reading has been an escape, a source of knowledge, and a conduit to multiple worlds. As we conversed individually and then as a group, I came to know them as persons who exhibited the strengths they sought in fictional role models, as sensitive poets who used language with precision, and as companions in inquiry who became comrades in understanding. I came to admire them immensely as people willing to talk about formative experiences emblematic of the world's shadowed side, and as

survivors who have taken those experiences to create lives of harmony, beauty, and reaching out to others. Together, we shared meals as well as conversation, nourished by communion and by words. We exchanged opinions about many novels, agreeing or disagreeing about characters and authors, and learning about one another from our likenesses and differences. We became mirrors and windows for one another.

In this sharing, similarities emerge in the words that are used or the stories that are told. We begin to see patterns in the tapestry of these connections, and weave understanding from the selvages of our stories. Gloria Anzaldúa comments on movement into consciousness:

Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape “knowing,” I won’t be moving. Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious. “Knowing” is painful because after “it” happens I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before. (2007, p. 70)

Through the conversations, we develop a new consciousness of what it is to become oneself through reading. We hope not to stay the same, but to cross another threshold, into understanding, into knowing, into greater awareness.

Aswell Doll writes, “...the idea of engaging the figments of imagination in an active dialogue is one means of self-discovery, the assumption being that the self is a fluid entity capable of many manifestations, many voices, which are hidden from conscious awareness” (2000, p. 93). We use fiction to bring such consciousness out of hiding, to explore the possibilities and, ultimately, our choices for the reflective consciousness of authentic being, being that has engaged in self-reflection in order to come to know itself.

As I contemplate and reflect upon the stories that participants tell, as well as my own stories, I begin to identify the thematic aspects of reading and becoming that follow. Van Manen warns of the limitations of such thematizing:

The point is that no conceptual formulation or single statement can possibly capture the full mystery of this experience. So a phenomenological theme is much less a singular statement...than a fuller description of the structure of a lived experience. As such, a so-called thematic phrase does not do justice to the fullness of the life of a phenomenon. A thematic phrase only serves to point at, to allude to, or to hint at, an aspect of the phenomenon. (2003, p. 92)

The work remains, then, of deepening that thematic phrase through the process of writing and rewriting. Through my writing, I seek to illuminate some of the essence of being through books, through considering the themes that we find emerging, through choosing images that describe our experiences vividly, through constructing a portrait of our reflective and reflected selves. I seek to introduce those selves in ways that shed light upon their journeys to being as souls liberated and enlightened through reading.

Liber-ation: Books as Agents of Freeing Oneself

The Latin *liber* forms the root of words that can be intricately intertwined in the experience of creating one's self through reading, as it combines the concepts of both "book" and "freedom." We trace many words regarding freedom to the verb, *liberāre*, meaning to release, to set free (Barnhart, 1988, p. 592), but how often do we associate such freedom with the products of the library, derived from a similar root?

For the participants, books offer liberty—to escape difficulties in their lives, to become the people they imagined themselves being, to envision a selfhood that felt right to them. Books provide insights to new worlds without and within. Freire comments, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless,

impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (1970/2004, p. 72). He realizes the potential for literacy to support the kind of self-realization, the naming of oneself and the world, that produces liberation from notions of self-limitation. We invent and reinvent ourselves through our reading, engaging with worlds within and without. As we become liberated through books, we shed the limitations imposed by family expectations or the views of others around us. Adrienne Rich says, “But long before entering college the woman student has experienced her identity in a world which misnames her, turns her to its own uses, denying her the resources she needs to become self-affirming, self-defined” (1979, p. 243). As we read, we take responsibility for our self-definition and self-naming, searching for our true names and selves. Books give us multiple names for what we experience and multiple experiences to enlarge our own.

Clarissa speaks about the power of naming the world and the new names that the worlds within books can bring to us:

It’s people trying to name things somehow, but in doing so, to touch each other. Because sometimes they’re saying things that I’ve been waiting for someone to say, or I’ve been trying to say. Thank you for saying it; I’ve been waiting, I’ve been looking for this. I’ve been wanting to hear this. I’ve been trying to hear this and couldn’t yet.

For Clarissa, books open words that allow her to name her own experience and to hear how others name similar circumstances. As Schwartz observes, “The good writer offers a new language, the silent language of the inner voice, the silver and the gold” (1996, p. 113). To name implies to designate or to speak about. When we name something, we acknowledge its state of being; when we speak about it, we bring it into the open. Fiction can disclose what has been hidden, or what we may be hiding from ourselves. As authors

name our experiences, we can begin to find our own inner voices, and to break through the silence of not-naming into speaking for ourselves.

From waiting to speak what she encounters in her life, Clarissa moves into appreciation of the clarity that the naming of others can bring to her own search for meaning. She moves from waiting into doing, crossing a threshold from thought into action, finding what she seeks, touched and encouraged by recognizing her own power. She continues, “Often, they’re articulating what I know or feel, but haven’t been able to articulate for myself yet.” She articulates, discerns, and selects where she wants to go from where she has been. Novels provide a road map of possibilities and encouragement to try out new ways of being:

Waking up the next morning and knowing I would be doing things a little differently because of it. Maybe living with a little more awareness of my surroundings, or living more delicately in my interactions with other people, or a little confident in something, or giving a little more faith to something, or being a different sort of friend. But I know that [novels] are almost like a bible or a spiritual guide. (Clarissa)

Clarissa uses the word “bible” that is often understood to be a sacred book, an authoritative one. Derived from the Greek *biblia*, (Barnhart, 1988, p. 92) meaning “book,” the word comes to us through Latin formations to give us words such as bibliophile, bibliognost, and bibliomane, all descriptive of study participants. For Clarissa, novels provide the authority to have faith in her own being in the world. She moves into action from understanding, buoyed by the encouragement she finds in books, allowing her to interact with her lived world in new ways, to see it differently, and to frame it within a new context. Her newfound understanding allows her to claim her own authority within her life, guided by her reading.

Greene observes:

There is always possibility. And this is where the space opens for the pursuit of freedom. Much the same can be said about experiences with art objects—not only literary texts, but music, painting, dance. They have the capacity, when authentically attended to, to enable persons to hear and see what they would not ordinarily hear and see, to offer visions of consonance and dissonance that are unfamiliar and indeed abnormal, to disclose the incomplete profiles of the world. (1988, pp. 128-129)

We use our reading to enlarge our incomplete profiles of experience and possibility. The art of fiction opens up our worlds, granting us the freedom to choose the possibilities we need to become ourselves. The art of literature becomes an agent of liberation when we attend authentically and are attuned to the insight it offers, at the threshold that mediates between consonance that confirms our experience and dissonance that expands it.

Ms. Wordsmith speaks similarly of a sense of her own agency derived from the very act of reading:

There is a sense of control in reading, in that you decide to pick up the book. You decide when you want to put it down. You decide on what basis you're going to interact with that. I think in the way that I felt this, certainly as a younger child, rather small and shy. And that there was more of a sense of intrusion from people...not only from outside my family, but in my family as well.

For her, books provide a bulwark from the intrusion of others, allowing her to find her own way into the world. They guard and protect her, forming a barricade against those she perceives as invasive, yet leave a path open that she can claim for herself. The action of picking up the book is an affirmation of her own being and of self-sufficiency. The books allow her to make her own decisions. For a small and shy child who feels others pushing in on her, this sense of autonomy is important and liberating.

All participants speak of the ways in which reading fiction has influenced them in the ways they chose to interact with difficult circumstances, whether that meant leaving

for better ones, taking action to change them, or coming to terms with accepting and coping with them in ways that fed their being rather than impinging upon it. Books provide freedom to imagine new circumstances, insights to change behaviors, and self-knowledge to find strength for survival. Through the worlds opened through reading, survival itself becomes not merely continued existence or simple endurance, but a state of being-in-the-world that can be one where children are not abused, where girls and women can find each other in sisterhood, where fidelity to the core of one's being provides strength for right decisions. Reading becomes part of self-becoming in liberating and supportive ways. In that liberation, we are drawn to move into new worlds.

Books as Gateways to Wider Worlds

As we are driven by our circumstances, we are propelled and supported by our reading, which gives us notions of the options to be found in the wider world, as well as reassurances that we possess the abilities to dwell within it. Participants find encouragement for their hopes, dreams, and aspirations in their reading, as well as depictions of worlds they wish to enter. When we read, we are no longer limited by the house or neighborhood or city or nation in which we dwell. Our dwelling is opened up to worlds outside the options we may perceive currently, to worlds that teem with possibilities. Heidegger notes:

Initially and for the most part, *Da-Sein* understands itself in terms of what it encounters in the surrounding world and what it circumspectly takes care of. Understanding is not just a bare taking cognizance of itself which simply accompanies all the modes of behavior of *Da-Sein*. Understanding signifies self-projection upon the actual possibility of being-in-the-world, that is, existing as this possibility. (1953/1996, p. 354)

Through our reading, we are able to project ourselves into worlds of possibilities beyond the ones that we find at hand. The circumstances we can imagine, and the ways in which

we can imagine dwelling within them, expand and multiply. We are no longer bound by our surrounding world and our current arena for caring, but introduced to worlds that may adjoin ours or that may seem very distant from them. Our understanding of ourselves expands, and we are able to use books to imagine new ways of dwelling.

Ms. Wordsmith returns to a beloved book for guidance (once again, we see that faith, that use of fiction as a source of direction) in considering relocation from her college environment:

This is something that I also found quite a bit in *Jane Eyre*. As I look at how that book is structured, and how she grows as a person, there's these decision points. And she's been in...an awful school. It's very constricting, but it is a shelter, and it's all she's known. And then there's something that she says about 'but I knew there was a wider world and this restlessness is in my nature.' Just something that's impelling her to seek what else there might be.

Just as the fictional character is impelled to movement, Ms. Wordsmith makes the choice to relocate, seeking her own wider world and acknowledging her own restlessness. She longs to break out of the strictures imposed by her environment, and into a world that may be unknown, but still attractive in its prospects for new experiences. Reading, in fact, whets her appetite for a world beyond her own country, leading to a Foreign Service career. This seed is planted in her adolescence.

There was a huge newsstand downtown; it was kind of an institution. It sold books as well as magazines, but they had magazines and newspapers from all over the world. So you would see the one Russian magazine—*Soviet Life*, I think it was called—that they allowed into the U.S. And you'd see newspapers in Hebrew and...things like that...that was fascinating to me because, again, there's a wider world and things to read. I would end my Saturday when I was teenager at this newsstand, and I'd come home with a stack of books and two or three magazines. (Ms. Wordsmith)

For Ms. Wordsmith, the world is literally presented through the printed word. She is able to travel far and wide without leaving the city of her birth, yet what she reads develops the yearning in her for a multiplicity of experiences in new and different places. From reading about countries and continents outside the Midwestern U.S., she germinates her yearning to experience such places directly. In following that yearning through her career path, she becomes a person of increased cultural understanding and sensitivity, learning new languages, living internationally. She dwells within societies that were once just ideas on a page, experiencing them directly and coming to understand other ways of being. Reading broadens the scope of our perceptions and moves us into arenas that we might not recognize or identify without such exposure. A book becomes a means of transportation that carries us both outside ourselves and back again to self-formation.

Transportation and Transformation: Books as Formative Forces

Anne notes that “The cliché is reading is a frigate. I forget who said that; somebody said reading is a frigate.” Reading sails us across oceans into new worlds. Books become vessels that carry us off to exotic places or to hidden areas of our own being. As readers becoming ourselves, we engage in a cycle of formation and transformation in a lifelong process of self-identification and change. In this continuing journey, books serve not only as a means of transportation, but as navigational charts, providing us with directions to seek as well as ways to get there.

In these conversations, I again find the idea of being transported, of being carried across into other realms to alternative ways of dwelling. Clarissa echoes Mike [in Chapter 2], “Some stories that I found transporting when I was a kid, where the experience of reading it was [that] the room around me disappeared and I was utterly in the book.”

Schwartz describes her observation of her sister in a similar space, “My sister appeared to be present, but she was in the book. This is a great and useful gift” (1996, p. 31). Our time in the books changes us, allowing us to be someone else for a while, but always returning us to a new version of ourselves. As we are transported, we are transformed, and the cycle continues.

The ability of fiction both to move us away from our bound selves and yet, paradoxically, to ground us more deeply in the world is described by Aswell Doll:

Imagination’s power, it is said, can transport us out of ourselves, out of our heroic ego stance, into the suchness of things...In order to educate the imagination, it seems we should position ourselves differently, less heroically, less literally, more in touch with foreign places, animals, plants, crystals, images from inside. To educate the imagination, we should seek to achieve distance from our personal, merely literal selves. (1995, p. 66)

Reading distances us from our literal selves and shifts us into worlds where we can be in touch with internal images and places that start out as foreign but then become home.

Alice Hoffman extols the value of “fiction that doesn’t just tell a story but tells readers something about what is deep within themselves” (2006, p. 85). We traverse through the journey of movement and return transformed, bringing back with us our new understanding of the suchness of what we have encountered, as well as of those places within us that are not merely our outer shells.

Clarissa describes the experience of incorporating what we discover about ourselves or others in reading. “What you do when you read a book is a little bit of the book becomes a little bit of you.” “Incorporate” derives from the Latin past participle of *incorporāre*, to unite into one body, carrying the sense of merging, combining, embodying. The experiences we acquire through reading become part of our own lived

bodies and part of our own sense of being. This intertwined relationship continues throughout our lives as readers. Participants tended to read some books multiple times, acknowledging that their experience of the book changed as they matured. Clarissa notes, “There was a point where I became much more critical or even aware of things. So going back to books, there was a cultural shift in my own head that sees things later on that [I] didn’t see the first few times.” Barone supports such a view of cultural shifting, “But I believed (with Geertz, 1988) that the concepts and values derived from one’s cultural background are best examined critically by vicariously experiencing the lives of those from other backgrounds” (2000, p. 173). As we look through windows to others, the image we perceive when we return to our mirror is deepened and transformed; we know we have become different through what we have read and have read differently through what we have experienced in our lives.

In yet another cyclical journey, the books change us; however, as we change, our experience of the same text, the same book, changes as well. Francine Prose notes, “We finish a book and return to it years later to see what we might have missed, or the ways in which time and age have affected our understanding” (2006, p. 5). Throughout our reading life, we are in a constant state of fluctuation, becoming who we are to become.

Books can also allow us to surmount our current circumstances by engaging our imagination. “My argument is simply that treating the world as predefined and given, as simply *there*, is quite separate and different from applying an initiating, constructing mind or consciousness to the world” (Greene, 1995, p. 23). As we read, we apply our consciousness to the worlds we encounter, and transform our own lifeworlds, no longer taking them for granted as “given.” We may be living in physical discomfort, but find

ways to transcend it through reading. Clarissa speaks of a long, cold winter in Macedonia, without electricity or dry firewood. “I’d crawl into my sleeping bag...My friends would send me books to keep me warm. And I started reading Hemingway, because he writes so often of...Africa, or Spain—and he would make me feel warmer.” While we may use fictional escape to evade discomfort, we may also recognize that there are times when we need to eliminate it instead. The capacity of reading to move us from one state of being to another is particularly helpful when we are living in dangerous homes, and can escape them, reject them, and learn to live outside them, using the strategies and encouragement we have found in books.

Reading as Refuge: Escaping Threats to Our Being

An important aspect of surmounting circumstances through reading is the opportunity to remove oneself from abuse. In the group of women with whom I engaged in conversation, there were multiple instances of toxic family situations. Several participants grew up in households and extended families that required them to cope with challenges such as alcoholism, incest, mental illness, and physical and emotional abuse. In these circumstances, reading became a refuge and an escape—a realm that offered them alternative ways of being-in-the-world, and of understanding and managing the world into which they had been thrust. Reading became a way of both disengaging from a difficult world and engaging with a more negotiable one, one where the possibilities to which we had been awakened included safety in worlds we chose.

Ms. Wordsmith describes a home that required silencing in order to keep family secrets hidden and unexamined:

It has a whole set of challenges, and one of the things about those kinds of family systems—well, certainly it was true in my family—was that there

would be...many things that were unsaid and unexplained...And when you're a kid, you're trying to put that into a framework and make some sense of it. Most times, you know, kids end up blaming themselves. But for me, it was just trying to figure out and decode what all of this meant. And so I definitely didn't feel that I fit into the family, because I couldn't figure it out. I didn't understand it. And nobody was talking about it.

Van Manen and Levering say this about such secrets: "Other secrets are imposed on children; sometimes these secrets turn into malignancies, leaving complex scar tissue on the membranes of personal identity" (1996, p. 5). The silence imposed on Ms. Wordsmith heightens her sense of alienation from her family, detaching personal identity from family identity. Through our reading, we can learn to question the concealment required in such a family system; books can be catalysts for unconcealment. Greene comments:

Concealment does not simply mean hiding; it means dissembling, presenting something as other than it is. To "unconceal" is to create clearings, spaces in the midst of things where decisions can be made. It is to break through the masked and the falsified, to reach toward what is also half-hidden or concealed. (1988, p. 58)

While we may not speak, we may still read, and in being transported to other realms, come to recognize and understand what we face, and begin to name it, if only to ourselves. We begin to create the spaces that allow us to reveal what has been masked. When we face difficulties, books can again be mirrors, reflecting our troubles, or windows that direct our vision to other possibilities. The lenses they provide can lead us to focus upon ourselves and see what we endure as something real, finally unconcealed; we can also look outward through windows that allow us to see how others handle similar situations. Mariah writes of being inspired by protagonists whose travails reflected hers:

Life was a perilous challenge for me, from one day to the next. My house was an un-safe place. Knowing only emotional turmoil in my home, I assumed that other people in the world were even worse. Action in the face of fear, secrecy, subterfuge, quick thinking, determination; these were

qualities I used and could recognize. It was heroines trapped by evil, in lands of danger, near or far, with whom I could quite easily identify.

For several participants, their identification with heroines in peril was liberating in the way it allowed them to acknowledge that such dangers existed. Mariah continues, “Here, at last was something as horrific as what I knew, told in complete detail, and with an unflinching eye. At last I had found a literary reality that spoke of my own reality through a strong author’s words.” Strong words concentrate and fix our gaze, and we see that our horrors are not merely imaginary, that they can be named and described vividly, and that our experiences are not something we are doomed to endure alone. Kate Walbert describes this sense of connection and of escape, “With each book I was no longer alone, or rather no longer felt lonely; through each book I escaped my own situation to live very, very far away” (2006, p. 173).

Over and over, participants tell the story of not feeling alone, of having their own feelings and experiences validated through fiction. In *Jane Eyre*, Ms. Wordsmith finds that Jane also feels helpless as a young child, battered emotionally and physically by family members:

I always felt that if I were—if anyone struck me, that I would be just destroyed... We did have physical violence in my house... and I think that was one of the reasons I got adept at being... there and not there, and physically, just being out of the way. So I related to that... I, too, felt very intense interior emotions and was not expressing them outside. People called me quiet, shy, and calm. Underneath, I was just a jumble of intense emotion that was not getting expressed... She also says, “Why was I always suffering? Why could I never please? Unjust, said my reason!” Now she’s expressing, right off the bat, things I was feeling very intensely.

Participants found such expressions of their own emotions and experiences to be empowering. For Ms. Wordsmith, Jane’s claim for justice could allow her own. Even as

she might deflect attention by minimizing her own physical and emotional presence within her household, she could acknowledge, even if only to herself, the emotions she kept hidden from others.

Books also provide a way of escaping household turmoil, not only through the physical action of retreating into reading, but in providing that window to other options, other possibilities. For Clarissa:

I feel like there were times when books were what kept me alive, or kept me going. Like, I only wanted to live, or not be numb, when I was inside of a book...Because those books—I was thinking if these girls did it, I can do it. If there's something more for them, there's something more for me, so if I can just keep going. And I will get through my day by reading. At some points, it would be three or four books a day. It would be from waking up to going to bed.

Through reading, Clarissa creates a safer lived space for her own being and becoming, and finds inspiration for getting through the challenges she faces. She develops a belief in a lived world beyond the one in which she is entrapped, and finds encouragement for the continuation of her own journey of becoming. No longer ensnared within the difficulties of her home life, she invites valor into her own being, encouraging herself through the example of characters who explored possibilities for themselves. She moves from occupying a space fraught with danger to embracing an interior space that she fills with bravery and hope. The liberating power of fiction frees her to become herself and provides possibilities for exploring what that self might look like in the characters she chooses to emulate.

Characters as Role Models for Differing Ways of Being

Such encouragement can be found in the ways participants looked to multiple characters for alternative ways of being. In what Mariah describes as “a trying-on of

persona,” we examine the world through the lenses of vicarious experiences and find support for our own growth in the ways that various characters develop. In distinction from the idea of a person, a living being, a persona carries the idea of a mask or fictional character. Assuming the masks of various fictional characters, we gaze once more into mirrors to ascertain whether our own faces might be among those to be discovered. In time, we no longer need such masking, but are prepared to gaze into the mirror and see ourselves, the selves we have created from the options we have selected.

Ms. Wordsmith asserts, “I think in your reading, you start to look at the strategies that people take in these stories to get through life—in many cases, to vindicate their lives.” While the word “vindicate” may be used in the sense of clearing from suspicion, it evolves from the Latin *vim dicāre*, to show authority or assert ownership (Barnhart, 1988, p. 1205). Just as characters may want to vindicate their actions or their choices, we make use of what we learn from them to claim our own authority and assert ownership of our being. We recognize that we can make choices that support our autonomy. When we claim our own authority, we start to become the authors of our own life stories. We authorize ourselves to act on our own behalf.

Clarissa describes her quest for validation in fiction. “And I think part of that was to validate my own choices, like thinking, well, if...Anne of Green Gables...can make these choices, I can too, and that’s OK. And sort of going to them for moral support, and for ideas and for choices.” To “validate,” from the Latin participle, *validātus*, of the verb, *validāre*, to make strong (Barnhart, 1988, p. 1192), carries the implication not only of strength, but also truth and soundness. Related concepts include those of value and valor. All of these notions appear in participants’ conversations, as they admire the strength of

characters who exemplify the strength they seek and in whom they see sound principles of truth.

The windows provided by books introduce us to choices, while reading also becomes part of our process of considering such choices. Clarissa continues, “So much of it is a chance to see what choices they make and then sometimes—I’ll always think, would I have the guts to do the same? Or would I choose to do the same? And what can I learn from the choice that they make?” Choices also place us at thresholds—will we act one way or another? Must we submit to the world into which we are thrown, or may we aspire to shape it to our own ends? We seek our own vindication and validation through our engagement with others through the windows that fiction provides, standing at the threshold of the choices that we perceive through the actions of characters who show us alternative ways of being-in-the-world.

All participants describe how characters with whom they identified particularly modeled varieties of strength to them, encouraging them to find and cherish their own strengths. Clarissa speaks about growing up in the rural western Pennsylvania mountains, where choices for her life seemed limited, and finding heroines, such as Anne of Green Gables, who validated her yearning for a wider world. “And the books that I was drawn to and still am are the ones with strong women, who make choices that are not the choices that you would have made in my town.” For her, this affirmation supported her taking a very bold path in life—signing up for the Peace Corps—despite the opposition of her family, and led to a period of “a lot of learning about myself—how strong I was.” For Clarissa, the powerful commitment to selfhood she found modeled in fiction provided a springboard into a wider world and the inner strength to take on a long-

term engagement with completely new experiences in an unfamiliar environment.

Clarissa's pursuit of her individuality requires her to resist pressures from without to listen to her own wisdom within.

In the conversations, I hear the adjective "strong" and the noun "strength" multiple times. Both derive from the Old English *strang* and *strengthu*, which imply power, force, and moral resistance in addition to physical sturdiness (Barnhart, 1988, p. 1075 and p. 1078). Participants speak often of claiming their own power as they are inspired by characters, of identifying the forces they perceive as acting upon them as they experience new situations fictionally, and, as Clarissa does, of finding their own capacity to resist familial and cultural expectations they find limiting as they see positive outcomes for characters who pursue their own paths despite obstacles.

Anne says of identifying with strong females, "I identify with women who are very strong, who will not be—when push comes to shove—will not be pushed, like Jane Eyre." These characters may not always divulge their strengths immediately, but, as we come to know them, begin to reveal their strong core of being. Anne continues, "They have—there is a core in them. It doesn't matter what they're doing, whether they're submitting to be a governess at Lowood, there is something in them that is uniquely their own. And it is something that does not always manifest itself initially." Just as it may take time to discover the strength of our heroines, it may take time and experience to discover our own inner core, that part of our own being that we will not cede or abandon. As van Manen and Levering observe, "We *are* our consciousness, and therefore we are psychologically, socially, and biographically ever-changing; and yet there must be a core of the self that remains the same" (1996, p. 101). We are conscious of another threshold

of stasis or stability versus change, and seek to claim our core even as we are open to new possibilities. For Anne, the strength of characters with such a strong core leads to a principle in her own life. “You don’t ever lose yourself no matter what you have to do... You don’t lose yourself, and you don’t lose the joy that you have.”

For these women, growing up in cultures that offered them only second-class citizenship engendered the need to develop that core within themselves according to their own visions, and fiction provided characters who both motivated them and showed them such a path would be possible. We fight not to lose ourselves when our core of being is challenged. Anzaldúa notes:

Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the vision of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. (2007, p. 38)

Fiction supports another kind of transmission—one that opens windows onto new ideas and new paradigms. Rich asserts, “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival. Until we understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves” (1979, p. 35). We can learn to question and trouble received notions. The Janes and Annes and Saras we admire depict centered and self-aware ways of being that allow us to understand ourselves as unique female persons whose inner core can be resolute and whose outer actions can be self-directed, questioning patriarchal assumptions that have been transmitted to us.

As with many of the elements of creating a sense of self through reading fiction, the experience begins in childhood. Katherine sought out tales that reversed the common

distressed princess–rescuer prince combination, as she rejected identification with the princess crying to be saved:

I always had the moment of—why has it got to be a guy? Why is it a guy that saves her? Why can't it be a girl instead of a guy? I was always hungry for those strong female characters. Sometimes it would be a wise woman on the road or somebody's mother who always fed the children when they came in and gave them that smart advice that they maybe took and 20 years down the road heard themselves saying it to their children. Especially in children's fiction, to me at least, that kind of adventurous, strong-minded female character was not the leading role, and when you have things like *The Secret Garden*, or *A Little Princess*, it's not until you see that kind of inquisitive, questioning female child that you can kind of appreciate that leading lady, so to speak.

Katherine recounts the tale of moving from childhood into adulthood, of the ways in which we use the lessons from our youth to inform our maturity. Noddings observes, “When we consider the natural interest we have in ourselves—past, present, and future—literature that allows us to look backward and forward is wonderful” (2005, p. 51). Our reading allows us to be both child and adult simultaneously, to make meaning of our experience from both perspectives, and to dwell at the threshold of looking backward and forward. We may not take the good advice until we're old enough to perceive its value, but we possess it when we need it, no matter how long ago we first encountered it. We find our wise women not only in our families, but in fiction, and the stories that introduce them to us also teach us how to appreciate their wisdom. Schwartz asks, “And without the voices of my youth, my ghostly familiars, how could I have become myself?” (1996, p. 17). We use the stories we read to narrate ourselves into our own knowing, our own sentience. The voices of our youth mature and become our own voices as we learn to speak our own stories and to integrate the narratives we have claimed as our heritage.

Anne describes other qualities of the heroines she enjoys:

They're complicated and complex people. I think that's what keeps you reading. If Jane didn't have...the spirit of rebelliousness against horrible cruelty in the beginning. And she breaks free, she goes to a new life, and she's got her art; she keeps pushing on that art stuff. And she talks about how wild she feels. And then, of course, she acts on it.

For Anne and others, that action is an important part of characters' being. It is not enough for them, or for us, simply to come to self-knowledge. We must evolve our being-in-the-world within what we come to know, and engage with the world in active ways. In addition, it is not enough for characters to be one-dimensional. While our fictional companions may have a central core of foundational qualities, we look for intricacy in their being. We yearn for our heroines to be multifaceted.

Deborah says of the female protagonists she admires:

They're physically strong...as a former athlete, that's how I perceived myself. They're financially secure...They're competent, they're smart, they have—in addition to their love interest—they do have other quality relationships, and I think that's a very important thing as well...One person can't be your be-all and end-all. You need to rely on other people...You can rely on yourself to some extent, but you also have to have this network around you.

Deborah brings additional dimensions of physicality and relationship to her connections with role models she finds in fiction. Her own athleticism is mirrored in theirs, and she also looks for them to reflect the value she places upon networks of friendships. Autonomy is important, and she is not drawn to characters who cannot care for themselves, but she prefers to see them in a context where they acknowledge their interconnectedness with others.

Katherine might disagree with Deborah, as she asserts, "One of the lessons that you come away with from Mary [from *The Secret Garden*] is that you can't please everybody and you've got to look after yourself first." Within the context of

relationships, we find multiple ways of being in literature, and we adopt or adapt them within the framework that allows us to negotiate most successfully in our own lived worlds. We use what we learn from literature to explore not only ways of being female, but new ways of being within the world into which we are thrown. We turn from the mirrors that show us ourselves as we are to the windows that show us what we may be, and we see more options for ways of being. We begin to question the ways of being we have been taught.

Troubling Our Notions of the World—Literature Leading to Questioning

Just as Katherine's reading leads her to question the notion of a male always being the rescuer, our engagement with fiction leads us to question the assumptions we have inherited from our families and our community. The world we begin to inhabit expands as reading allows us to encounter people and places that we would not come across in the daily life of our neighborhood, our school, our office. Levinas describes this process of becoming: "The relationship with the Other is not produced outside of the world, but puts in question the world possessed" (1961/2003, p. 173). As we discover other ways of being in fiction, we begin to question ourselves in engagement with others; fiction replaces our possession of worlds in a space of inquiry. Van Manen and Levering note that, "Self-observation makes possible both knowledge of oneself and alienation from oneself" (1996, p. 98). We move from such alienation into self-knowledge as we absorb new ideas and grapple with what they can mean to us. We are enriched by alternate worldviews.

Malone comments, "...in fiction I come to know and understand people I may have not met otherwise. And thus I am persuaded to a more compassionate, generous,

and loving response in my life beyond books” (2003, p. 164). Clarissa looks to literature to examine, “What are the other choices that are available to me, that I can only find in fiction and I can’t find in the world around me? And yet, if someone wrote them down, then they must be valid. If Jane Austen says it’s a possible choice, why not?” Not only do the characters we adopt as role models demonstrate options, the lived fictional worlds they occupy create new dwelling spaces that we can imagine ourselves inhabiting. Those spaces can quake the grounding we have received in our habitats of origin.

Mariah talks of discovering valuable concepts that enabled her own survival in reading *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*:

That was a lesson to me: bide your time, bide your manners, get away, get safe—and don’t have anything to do with the person. So this is a very, very dark book that really spoke to me...you are not alone, young woman. There is a history of young women having been treated this way—having been set up by ignorant parents—of a society that refuses to acknowledge the damage done to them. And you’re not alone. And just be careful; be strong; bide your time.

Once again, through reading, we can name and recognize evil when it confronts us, and can place ourselves within a context for the abuse we have received. In our indignation upon Tess’s behalf, we can develop righteous ire at our own exploitation or violence against us and our families. Our sense of aloneness in resisting such mistreatment is mitigated by fellowship with a character. Her actions can inform ours, whether they are successful or unsuccessful. In observing their denouement, we can develop strategies for our own survival, and can seek the hope to flourish in our own lives. Susan Kennedy describes the sense of freedom engendered by such an epiphany: “This book’s pages dissolved the bars of my cage, and I felt myself fly free for the first time” (2006, p. 149).

We no longer have to accept pain as a fact of daily life; we can question the dominant paradigms we have been given.

Participants credit reading with their development of more tolerance for others through understanding the motivations of characters. Anne finds the ability to experience multiple points of view in novels can be a window into what drives people to certain choices and behaviors. “One of the interesting things is you get to know why people do things. In real life, you don’t always get to know why people do things. You don’t know why that person is so crabby...you have no background with most of the people that you meet.” Deborah says of the insight she receives from reading:

When these events happen in real time, I’m very judgmental and censorious, and it just gives me another way of looking at things, and humanizes people. And I think it helps me. I think one of my big faults is that I’m very judgmental... And I find that helpful and I think that does help me be less judgmental and therefore a better person.

For Deborah, this increased understanding is reflected in her lived relationships, as she treats others with more compassion.

Anne also comments on how understanding characters’ motivation can play out in her lived world. “I think that the reading gives me a chance to make space for that person to enter.” Through fiction, we are led to question the assumptions we carry with us, those elements of our outlook that we might otherwise leave unexamined and unnamed. As Greene describes, “When the characters are seen to view things differently, this phenomenon may make readers conscious of the inadequacy of some of the patterns or interpretations they themselves have produced along the way” (1995, p. 97). We are encouraged by reading to follow the consciousness offered by characters we admire and to look for new patterns that can be more useful to us, even if they are not patterns our

families of origin support. In leading us to questioning, fiction allows us to break out of constricting molds.

Finding the Forbidden: Reading as Transgression

In addition to being transporting and transformative, reading can be transgressive. Once again, the “trans” prefix signifies across, and the sense of disobedience, trespass, and going beyond limits comes to us through Middle French from the Latin *trānsgressus*, past participle of *trānsgrēdi*, go beyond or walk across (Barnhart, 1988, p. 1160). As readers moving beyond our received worldviews, we again cross a threshold as fiction incites us to test limits. Often, the assertion of our own selfhood through reading can be seen as disobedience.

As our notions of the world are troubled, we move into questioning, and can be alienated from and castigated by our families and others. Ms. Wordsmith remembers, “My parents at certain points began to call me ‘bookworm,’ and it wasn’t a compliment.” Particularly in more toxic families, the act of reading and being able to imagine a better world can be seen as a betrayal, and parents sometimes go to great lengths to punish such disloyalty. Clarissa describes one such power struggle:

As a kid, I would be reading for escapism, and at dinner time, they would literally take my book from me and put it in a place that I couldn’t get to. It would be above the refrigerator, or above my mother’s mixer, and I would be so angry. Dinner would be this exercise I had to do in order to get my book back and go off into my place.

Ms. Wordsmith recounts similar tactics from her family. “I hid behind my books. My parents had to stop me from reading at the table. It was a sense that they wanted me to interact more with the real world. And that I was becoming too interior.” Just as I endured recurrent arguments with my family, who thought I should be outdoors or

attending to chores, participants experienced conflict with theirs when reading was seen as an activity that separated the reader from the family circle. While we might have wished to hide from violent or pedophilic parents, family systems demanded at least the appearance of our participation. While we perceived ourselves as engaged in self-formation, our families saw a stubborn little girl who refused to partake in family meals and activities, choosing a fantasy lifeworld over the one in which they dwelled.

In several instances, there was also an inherent tension between parents who wanted to encourage intellectual growth but still saw family unity as threatened when one member was “not there.” Deborah also speaks of how her reading placed her between two worlds, engendering both encouragement and resentment from her parents:

For a period of time, I could kind of shut myself in my room and read, and then my father decided that that wasn't healthy. And that the family all needed to be together in the family room. So the TV's on, and my brothers are zooming around with cars and trucks, and my sister's doing whatever, but I was in my book. And all of that was shut out. I was oblivious. I had my chair...I had a nice lamp. It was a nice big chair and I could put my feet under me and kind of curl up and be very comfortable and in the winter, I would bring the comforter off my bed, because it was downstairs; it was a little chilly in the winter...I remember my mother would call me for dinner, and she'd have to call me a couple of times...and she and my father—she was thrilled that I was reading, and he was like...nose in a book, bookworm. And this was a derogatory thing in his mind. With all of that going around, I was in my own world.

Participants speak often of the sense of being elsewhere, of removing themselves from the quotidian. In frightening families, that strategy can be lifesaving, and even in more benign ones, it can be seen as a removal of oneself from the closeness perceived as the right way to engage with family members. Just as we experience ourselves as being “in” books, so do the families we have left behind feel our absence. We focus on our own interiority even in the face of demands to address our exterior lives. Levinas says of such

focus, “Recollection, in the current sense of the term, designates a suspension of the immediate reactions the world solicits in view of a greater attention to oneself, one’s possibilities, and the situation” (1961/2003, p. 154). We use fiction to re-collect ourselves, attending to our own possibilities. We exist at the threshold of inward and outward, choosing the book-lifeworld that allows us to be the individual we desire to be at that moment, rather than the one those around us want.

As readers, we also become transgressors, creating a sense of conflict within ourselves when our desire to inhabit fictional worlds places us at odds with those close to us. Nevertheless, we choose to keep reading. We assert our own selfhood by refusing to accept the necessity of giving up our books to maintain family ties.

Something in the relationship between a reader and a book is recognized as wise and fruitful, but it is also seen as disdainfully exclusive and excluding, perhaps because the image of an individual curled up in a corner, seemingly oblivious of the grumblings of the world, suggests impenetrable privacy and a selfish eye and singular secretive action. (Alberto Manguel, in Bascove, 2001, p. 78)

Manguel recognizes the mixed pride and resentment that the act of individual reading can engender in those who do not participate in it. For multiple participants, our families wished to encourage and support our intellectual growth, yet sometimes saw our turning to books as a turning-away from them.

Van Manen and Levering comment upon the tension between our inwardness and outwardness and how our attention to our own inner space separates us from others:

Inwardness as inner space calls forth the opposite of the outer nature of bodily appearance. It presents itself as a hidden, invisible, imaginary, mysterious space in which secrets dwell that one does not want to divulge, and in which a prized treasure of memories or a hideous hoard of woe can either be stored or retrieved when wanted. (1996, pp. 109-110)

For several of us, the family secrets we did not divulge were certainly hideous and woeful. We longed for the imaginary and inner space that allowed us to keep our secrets and to transform them into a better life in an imaginary realm. Fiction allowed us to dwell within our inner space, particularly when our outer circumstances were difficult or dangerous. Our disobedience allowed us to walk across into better worlds, crossing a threshold of choosing different paths.

We also transgress through the timing of our reading. Rather than limiting our time in fictional worlds to moments when we are permitted to be at leisure, we encroach upon family time, work hours, and our own slumber. Anne describes the joy of reading instead of sleeping. “It was the classic covers over the head, flashlight, and I would read a book in one night. I don’t know that I took in much of what I read. But it was just—the fact that I was reading after lights out—it was like ha, ha, ha, very cool.” She defies parental rules in order to seize more time in the fictional lifeworld, enjoying her own sense of evading expectations. Anzaldúa portrays a similar scene, “When I was seven, eight, nine, fifteen, sixteen years old, I would read in bed with a flashlight under the covers, hiding my self-imposed insomnia from my mother. I preferred the world of the imagination to the death of sleep” (2007, p. 87). Once again, we see a girl concealing her actions, separating herself from her mother, making a choice for an imaginative world over one that could be dull or menacing as she associates sleep with death, a conflation we come across often in folk tales. Instead of the stillness and silence of sleep, we choose the liveliness of fictional scenes, hovering at the threshold of suspension of activity or participation in fictional lifeworlds.

Schwartz expresses the same sense of such reading as a way of claiming one's own being. "All the reading I did as a child, behind closed doors, sitting on the bed while the darkness fell around me, was an act of reclamation. This and only this I did for myself. This was the way to make my life my own" (1996, p. 119). We assert our own autonomy in choosing the time of our reading in conflict with parental directives, and take a step toward a separation that allows us to become ourselves. Corrigan notes, "For all readers, male and female, there is a discrepancy between the possibilities offered by the world of the imagination and the possibilities offered by real life" (2005, p. xxviii). As readers, we choose the possibilities offered to us through imagination, even if we must claim our privacy by surrendering rest, even if we must create a small glimmer of light to read by that has to be screened by bedclothes. Just as Ms. Wordsmith has described, we choose to pick up the book, and to grasp it as a talisman of our own identity, holding back the intrusion of darkness.

Reading can both distort our sense of time and place and open it to simultaneous and separate modes of being, as I have discussed in Chapter 2. Katherine confirms that it can render us out of synch with daily life as she talks about devouring a newly released Harry Potter book:

I ended up getting it the release date—the actual day of—I'd ended up ordering it online. And sat down and read it and read it and read it, and it was long enough that it took me through the night, into the next day, and my husband was like, you're still up? You're still reading that? He's gotten up; I'm still curled up in the chair. No, I'm going to finish this.

Katherine has entered so completely into the world of Harry Potter that she is reluctant to leave it, even when called upon to do so by her husband. Many of us who conversed have several stories of all-night reading, of books that are so

engaging, so fascinating, that we ignore the passage of the sun into and out of darkness. The allure of such books is echoed by Clarissa:

It's like the chance to crawl into something. I'd literally go into it, and I'd lose sense of time. You stay up all night and don't realize that—the last Harry Potter book—I started reading it and I realized the sun was out and the birds were singing. And I hadn't gone to bed yet because that—I mean, sleep—you're not sleepy, you're in there—and more alive.

Clarissa introduces the paradox of feeling more alive in the fictional world. Just as we have heard that fiction can be more truthful than nonfiction, we hear that it can engage our sense of existence more vividly. “As good, serious fiction can, it disclosed to me, more vividly, more accurately, more articulately than my own memories, what my experience had been” (Malone, 2003, p. 116). Fiction allows us to articulate our experience to ourselves, to reflect upon it, and to live through it more intensely.

We transcend physical demands—the need for sleep, for example—because we have removed ourselves into another realm, where we dwell more deeply. “This means that, not unlike children, we must be able to give ourselves trustingly to the reality of the novel” (van Manen, 1985, p. 184). As we give ourselves over in such trust, the demands of the everyday release their hold upon us, and we inhabit an alternate reality, where sleep is not needed, but consciousness is, and that awareness moves us closer to our sense of our own being.

We can also transgress in reading when we move beyond the limitations imposed upon us by society. We all have felt the expectations and constraints of gender roles, and the notions of what is appropriate for “good” girls. “One cannot have one's imagination released when one is boxed in and tied down by defining rules” (Aswell Doll, 2000, p.

165). We turn to fiction when we want to bend or break those rules, when we want to open up the possibilities of other ways of defining ourselves.

For most participants, curiosity about the world and themselves led them to seek out books considered “too adult” for them in childhood or their early teens. Ms. Wordsmith describes an unusual conflict with a beloved librarian when she tries to check out an autobiography by someone who struggled with alcoholism. “She just said something like, ‘It’s not for you.’ That kind of thing. And I was just incensed about that because even at that age, I felt that those books were mine. They were all mine.” Her sense of possession of the books in the library reflects the autonomy she is beginning to feel as a person, and the librarian’s dismissal of her judgment exasperates her. She is indignant that the librarian defines her as someone who is not ready to read about a problem that she lives with daily, and she wishes to stake her claim to the riches available in what she sees as a collection that belongs to her.

For more than one participant, books provided pathways into information about and understanding of sexuality that was not available to them from homes or schools.

Clarissa recounts her introduction to such understanding:

I remember that’s actually how I figured out about sex, because they let me in the adult section one summer, because I had read through the children’s section. I remember picking up one of those bosom-busters, reading it and saying, oh, no way, no, that can’t be it. And I grabbed about five of them, went back into a corner, went through each one, and each one had the same thing, and I thought...that must be it. That’s appalling! That’s terrible! And I never told my mom that I figured it out in the library. I didn’t want the librarians to cut off my access. But I was horrified. It took several years to resign myself to it.

I recollect my own exploration of sexuality through fiction as a teenager, when popular books such as *Peyton Place*, *Marjorie Morningstar*, and *The Sandpiper* dealt with the

subject. I wouldn't read these at home, but would seek them out, and was always pleased to find them, in homes I visited as a babysitter. I would be able to pick up where I had left off at the last engagement, and continue to discover startling and revealing descriptions, along with a range of points of view, that informed my ignorance but left me in conflict about my own feelings. Certainly, most of these works emphasized not only the powerful pull of the physical, but also the difficult consequences of acting upon that pull outside of conventional marital relationships. For adolescent girls, fiction becomes a forum of inquiry about an aspect of being that poses many questions and offers many pitfalls. Books become teachers of the taboo, initiating us into knowledge that our parents and teachers denied us.

“Novels are so attractive because they allow us to experience secrecy, to break through secrecy, to see what is hidden (but knowable), and also to see what is mysterious (and therefore unknowable in a direct way)” (van Manen & Levering, 1996, p 38). One aspect of these encounters is that of secretive reading, where we conduct the reading that we believe could be considered questionable away from the gaze of the adults around us. Clarissa says of *The Color Purple*, “That was another subversive book that I read in high school. I think I actually never checked that one out of the library. I know there were objectionable words on the first page, and so I read that one in the public library without ever actually checking it out.” She feels compelled not to expose her engagement with the book to the scrutiny of her parents, just as I avoided reading bestsellers in my own home, even though my mother owned copies of them. She uses the word “subversive,” which derives from the Latin prefix *sub*, under, and the verb *vertere*, to turn (Barnhart, 1988, p. 1086). We conduct our activities underground, turned away from adult

supervision. Such concealed reading reflects the disapproval we expect, as well as our own alienation from the pervasive values of our environment.

Escape and Estrangement: Being Out-of-Place

Just as reading can confirm us in our own sense of being, it can reaffirm that sense of our own being when we feel alienated, whether we are appalled by family abuse or simply identify ourselves as different from those around us. Conflicts can be as straightforward as seeing the world in dissimilar ways, as Anne describes:

I am a very different person than my mother was, and she had a hard time with that. As the oldest, she just kept trying to mold me into different ways, and I just would not mold, and that would piss her off immensely. So, Anne of Green Gables, she comes along and she's supposed to be a boy, and she's not a boy, and I just loved every minute of it, because I felt in a way parentless—like an orphan, like an outsider in my own home.

Ms. Wordsmith writes about a similar distancing from her family and again turning to *Jane Eyre* for affirmation of ways of being that felt right to her:

Jane was unlike many of the meek, self-sacrificing heroines I encountered in other books. When mistreated by her sadistic relatives, she fights back, physically and verbally, something that my inhibited self never did. She knows in her soul that she does not deserve abuse, though she is stuck in an unhappy circumstance with no one to support her...Although I was not an orphan, often I too felt acutely the lack of nurture and protection in my intimate circle, especially from adults.

The acceptance of Anne of Green Gables allows Anne to reconcile to being female instead of male, although gender identity did not emerge directly as an issue in many of the conversations. Instead, participants expressed discomfort with the pigeonholing of females into limited roles, and how reading fiction enabled them to imagine alternate roles for themselves. Nevertheless, as a firstborn daughter, I can attest to the influence of parental preferences for a firstborn son and the ways in which such expectations can breed discontent with one's own gender.

Jane's courage allows Ms. Wordsmith at least a glimmer of the possibility of fighting back when she feels treated unjustly. Ms. Wordsmith writes about Jane Eyre: "Her plight echoed my own feeling of being an outsider in my own family circle." Ms. Wordsmith sees Jane's indignation on her own behalf and is able to recognize that she herself does not deserve to be abused, even if she chooses not to retaliate in the same way that Jane does. She also recognizes that she is not receiving the care from adults that children need and deserve. Both participants identify with heroines who are without living parents in the world, and both use the word "orphan" to describe their feeling detached from their family and community.

The word "orphan" derives from similar words in Latin, *orphanus*, and Greek, *orphanós*, which carry a sense not only of being parentless, but of deprivation, and cognates in other languages refer to inheritance as well (Barnhart, 1988, p. 737). What is the experience of feeling parentless in a purportedly intact family? Of what sort of inheritance do we feel deprived when the adults in our lives do not accept us for who we are, or fail to protect us from harm? As we struggle with such questions, books can both console us and incite us to action upon our own behalf. We learn to have compassion for ourselves and not to tolerate mistreatment.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes observes:

While exile is not a thing to desire for the fun of it, there is an unexpected gain from it; the gifts of exile are many. It takes out weakness by the pounding. It removes whininess, enables acute insight, heightens intuition, grants the power of keen observation and perspective that the "insider" can never achieve. (1995, p. 184)

Participants express the exile they feel from their families, yet find acceptance from the characters they befriend in literature. While we may have faced challenges and

difficulties, our reading has allowed us to emerge as strong personalities, with inner cores of being that have brought us success in the world. While we may have felt exiled from the households in which we were reared, we found other dwelling places in fictional realms, where we received the nurturing our families did not provide. Pinkola Estes continues, “Even though the outcast is driven away, she is at the same time driven right into the arms of her psychic and true kin, whether these be a course of study, an art form, or a group of people” (p. 184). For participants, our psychic and true kin can be found within the pages of books, and we run to them for comfort, understanding, and acceptance.

Books can give us hope and the courage to expect better treatment as we mature.

Anne writes about seeing another way of dealing with mistakes in *Anne of Green Gables*:

I was always making mistakes and Anne's were such a comfort to me. There was a major difference between Anne's mistakes and mine. After the appropriate lesson was learned, Anne went on her way with no further mention of the incident, unless she herself brought it up. In my family, each and every mistake, no matter how long ago, was still current and alive, waiting to ambush you at unlikely moments.

Through fiction, we can learn that it is not necessary to relive every mistake over and over, allowing self-forgiveness and the ability to let go of errors while still learning from them. Not every transgression must be revisited or used as a weapon in family conflicts. Even if her family must hold on to her errors, waiting to use them in ammunition for ambushes, Anne learns that she need not retain them once she has extracted the appropriate lesson. In reading, we come to know that the ways of our families are not the ways of all, and that there are ways of being that could fit us much more comfortably.

Another type of possibility offered by fiction is modeling lives that illustrate alternatives to violent or perilous homes. Mariah writes:

Little Women is the book that I have read more times than any other. It provided a home for me to visit where family members were kind to each other, cared for each other, and supported each other against the outside world. It is said that Louisa May Alcott wrote to escape the cold, almost cruel lack of emotion that was a part of her family's stern household. By so loving to be in this fantasy place, the March girls' home, perhaps I was escaping the lack of warmth in my own.

For those of us who grow up in dangerous homes, books open windows into safer ones.

While we might scoff at the sentimentality of families such as the five little Pepper children, we also yearn for their closeness and support of one another. We find models of parents who actually care for their children in fiction, allowing us to imagine being nurtured in loving ways. Fiction permits us to move from exile into a home place created by our own imaginative powers, emplacing us in our own being.

No place like not-home: Out-of-place in our hometowns. We can feel out-of-place not only in our families, but in our communities. Casey notes, "Place, already cultural as experienced, insinuates itself into a collectivity, altering as well as constituting that collectivity. Place becomes social because it is already cultural" (1993, p. 31). While some of us grew up feeling supported by our environment, others found themselves at odds with the cultural and social environment of their surroundings. While a large or even mid-sized city might absorb and give us access to a multiplicity of cultures, smaller rural and suburban spaces tend to be more homogeneous. If we are not attuned to the homogeneity that surrounds us, if we are socially inept because our inner worlds are more focused upon the wider worlds we perceive through books, we can experience great discomfort. We stand at a threshold of the small world of the town and the wide world available to us in literature.

In writing about *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* as a formative book, Clarissa describes her identification with how out-of-place the protagonist, Kit, feels:

Growing up in my own hometown and in my own family, I always felt like an oddity. I always wondered why I had been born into this life if there was no space in it where I could be myself. My sister used to tell me that after high school, I could leave and go to college and that things would be better there. I felt connected to Kit, with her longing to escape New England and go to a place that was warm and lovely, where the ability to swim wasn't something that had to be hidden and not spoken of, where she didn't have to constantly worry about saying or doing the wrong thing that would make even more of an oddity of herself. In *The Witch*, Kit often secretly cried herself to sleep, longing for Barbados, the symbol of a place that welcomed her for who she was. Until I escaped to college, and even then on breaks that sent me back to my hometown, I secretly cried myself to sleep often, longing for a sign that someday I would have a life that I could fit into without work and painful effort. Although I liked my teachers and did well academically at school, high school for me was a torture I needed to survive so that I could escape far enough away to find my life.

Clarissa finds with Kit the connections that she cannot forge in her daily life, as well as a role model for surviving the displacement of being an “oddity,” a word that comes to us from Scandinavian sources meaning left over, single, unique (Barnhart, 1988, p. 722).

When we are out-of-place in the collectivity of our hometown, we feel left over, singular, no long part of the collective. Our own uniqueness is perceived not as a positive attribute, but as strangeness. When we are so alienated, the realm of books can feel more like home.

Clarissa touches upon several ideas we see multiple times, such as escape, silencing, secretiveness. The warmth of Kit's Barbados provides a contrast to the coldness of a rust belt town where Clarissa does not fit in comfortably. Kit's longing for a different world she has known feeds Clarissa's longing for worlds she has not yet experienced, but believes may be attainable. Both Kit and Clarissa know they are out-of-

place. However, where Kit arrives from a place where she did fit in, Clarissa must trust that such a place is part of her future. Just as Kit hides her ability to swim, Clarissa hides the tears that she sheds in solitude. As a child and adolescent in a family touched by alcoholism, Clarissa knows that there is much not to be spoken of, and Kit shares her vigilance about saying or doing the right things that allow her to operate within her community as one who fits into the norm. Both find such watchfulness wearing and long for a community capable of accepting them as they are, where they no longer need to conceal or torque the truth of themselves.

Clarissa continues, “Kit’s courage, and the courage of other characters from the fiction of my childhood and adolescence to steel me gave me the courage to rescue myself.” For her, this rescue involves moving far away from her community, creating community in a foreign land and “becoming through travel.” Books transport her until she can make her physical escape, inspiring and encouraging her. They provide a community of imagination that allows her to seek her own community in the world.

We may be limited by the potential ways of being of our neighborhood or our small town, but books open up a limitless world to us. Clarissa speaks of how her reading gave her the wherewithal to move beyond such limitations:

What books did is – they showed me choices. I mean, unrealistic choices—there’s no real options of being a dragon slayer now,—but even so, the choices that I saw possible in books definitely led me to sort of think beyond the choices that were available in my community and move out of it. Because not a lot of people leave where I lived, and I’ve taken a very different path than most people from my community. And definitely from my family. And I know it’s because in books, I was always reading about people going out into the world, young women going out into the world and doing things, and making changes and making choices that might not be the norm in their community, but being bold enough to do it anyway, because that was right for them...I mean, it was books, it was reading them and knowing that I had to find my own happiness, I had to

go out—and maybe it would be a going out and a coming back, but I would definitely have to leave first to really become who I needed to become to be happy.

Pinkola Estes says of home: “The exact answer to ‘Where is home?’ is more complex...but in some way it is an internal place, a place somewhere in time rather than in space, where a woman feels of one piece” (1995, p. 283). To feel of one piece in our own being, we may need to recognize that our environment is not our right dwelling-place. Clarissa finds the home in which she can be whole by leaving the one where she does not fit, buoyed by fiction that supports her quest for a happiness that differs from her community’s definition of contentment. In reading, we find spaces for home that may be much bigger than our places of origin.

No place for us: Out-of-place in society. For some of us, however, even the fictional world may not offer a comfortable place. Ms. Wordsmith writes, “As an African American growing up in an overwhelmingly white environment, I often felt that my outer ‘package,’ my brown skin, was a barrier between me and my classmates and teachers.” She is not able to reconcile her alienation from her community in the same way, though, because of the dearth of literature with African American characters available to her growing up. For the group, racial identity does not come up as a specific topic until the group discussion, when Ms. Wordsmith notes, “I realized about my reading...that there were no African American figures for me to read.” She continues, “So there’s this sort of un-booked hole in me about African Americans.” When we speak of a hole, we evoke a sense of hollowness or void, something that is empty, needing to be filled. Where others have been able to find nourishment, filling themselves with books, Ms. Wordsmith remains hungry for literature that features heroines who look like her. Throughout our

lives, but especially in childhood and adolescence, we long for the fictional mirrors that reflect our own experience. For Ms. Wordsmith, that mirror has a fissure where African-American experience is covered-over rather than revealed, hidden in the crevasse of a hegemonic culture.

When African American literature starts to become more a part of the canon, Ms. Wordsmith is already an adult. Even in literature currently available, such as the novels of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, she objects to a type of dwelling on oppression and troubles that she encounters:

I still feel I have this conundrum of reading about someone who's had experience as an African American, but that I want to embrace. And maybe that's more about me than anything else, but I just feel like there's this legacy of pain, there's transcending the pain, but it's not—I can't really say that it's something that's informed my lived experience in reading.

Ms. Wordsmith does not want to embrace a legacy of pain, but has not yet discovered many African American authors or characters with whom she can identify in a positive way. What is the experience of living within a society that, for all its supposed progress in racial relationships, still has not found a place for the “Other?” For Ms. Wordsmith, fiction can provide solace and support, but it stops short of mirroring her in a way that she can truly see her own face reflected. While she is able to draw strength and inspiration from heroines like Jane Eyre, she continues to search for an African-American role model who is a strong, smart woman who does not have to spend most of a novel dealing with oppression. Anzaldúa says, “There is another quality to the mirror and that is the act of seeing. Seeing and being seen. Subject and object, I and she. The eye pins down the object of its gaze, scrutinizes it, judges it” (2007, p. 64). For Ms. Wordsmith, it is difficult to find the mirror in which she can see herself and also be seen. As an object

of novels that describe an oppressive past, she instead aspires to become a subject of a future in which she can be recognized.

In the group conversation, we continue to discuss the difficulty in reading about the oppression of a group with which we identify. While Scarlett O'Hara is a character a few of us have enjoyed for her spirit and grit, Ms. Wordsmith comments, "I couldn't read *Gone with the Wind*. I couldn't get past page 20." Mariah echoes her:

If it's about racism, and it's going to be painful, I don't find that edifying. Because I have the same experience reading about the Holocaust. I've read a few books. I refuse to see *Schindler's List*. I will never watch *Sophie's Choice*. I don't need that. No, ma'am. I read *Night* because I had to.

For Ms. Wordsmith and Mariah, books that focused on slavery or the Holocaust are mirrors into which they have no desire to look, whereas for others of the group, they are windows onto difficult experiences that we share only vicariously. Mariah expresses her distaste for such tales as she observes, "But it's just interesting that when the horror is our own, and we've grown up with the folk tales of our own folk, it's not that edifying."

When the stories mirror dismaying tales from our backgrounds, we choose not to enter into fictional worlds that frighten and repulse us.

Both Ms. Wordsmith and Mariah acknowledge, however, that such stories can be edifying when they act as the windows they are for the rest of us. Mariah comments:

If you can get something from *Gone with the Wind* that you start to go, well, why are they treating people this way? Why is Mammy loyal? Why is this situation acceptable? How does this situation arise? And good for us if we can get something out of that.

We find that reading can lead us to questioning, that seeing through windows to oppressive experiences can trouble our taken-for-granted notions of the world even when we belong to the "un-Other" population, the hegemonic one that is so often doing the

oppressing. Fiction provides lenses that can clear our myopia. Mariah lightens the mood of the conversation when she observes some of the attraction we find in books that provide a rich lifeworld, even if it is one that enfolds oppression: “Mostly, we come away with oh, wouldn’t we like to live in the big house? And wear Scarlett’s dresses?” Anne responds, “I’d like to have her 17-inch waist.” As we laugh, however, we understand that our worldviews can be limited, and that fiction can enlarge our experience by sensitizing us to the suffering of others. Levin observes:

As the communicativeness of all great literature attests, in its spanning of historical epochs and cultural worlds, it is the open and sincere sharing of that which has been directly experienced in a thoughtful way which transcends most completely, or anyway most satisfactorily, the inevitable discontinuities that can so easily separate different people, different historical epochs, and different cultures. (1985, p. 81)

Fiction bridges our separation, placing us at the self/other threshold to share experience and to reflect upon it thoughtfully. We consider our discontinuities but learn to connect through understanding both others and ourselves.

We find much in fiction to provide us with a sense of a space that we might inhabit when we feel out-of-place in the world in which we find ourselves existentially thrown. For many of us, fictional lifeworlds are more comfortable spaces for dwelling than the homes or communities or societies into which we have been born.

Dwelling in Written Worlds

We dwell in our fictional worlds in the same way we dwell in our “real” ones—as physical beings experiencing multiple sensory inputs, as explorers discovering alternative and attractive lifeworlds, and as persons seeking to make meaning of what they experience. As I note in Chapter 2, we dwell in the world not only physically, but also in psychic space, where we conduct what Heidegger calls our “be[ing] on the earth as a

mortal” (1971/2001, p. 145). Heidegger also comments, “The nature of art would then be this: the truth of beings setting itself to work” (1971/2001, p. 35). Our dwelling is not merely an inhabiting of place, but a seeking of truth as well—truth that moves us into being. Levinas observes:

To dwell is not the simple fact of the anonymous reality of being cast into existence as a stone one casts behind oneself; it is a recollection, a coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome. (1961/2003, p. 156)

All participants speak of how vividly they experience entering into the lifeworlds of the novels they read, of finding homes within fictional lifeworlds, and of feeling welcome in them, as they use these fictional experiences to come to themselves.

In addition to the fiction-driven relationships we develop and maintain, time and space can be fractured and transcended. Maxine Greene notes, “It is a function of our capacity to use our imaginations—to break with the routine and the useful and the conventional and enter into another, often magical, space” (1981/2001e, pp. 45-46). Fiction provides that magical space, and every one of our senses is brought into play when we cross the threshold into the lived spaces within books.

Imaginary Spaces: Interplay between Fictional and “Real” Places

Clarissa comments several times, in both individual and group conversations, about how reading fiction has inspired her to travel to specific places, seeking locations and landscapes that various authors had introduced to her:

So when I was in Paris, I read Hemingway’s book, *A Movable Feast*. And then I jotted down the addresses. In the mornings I would read the chapter; in the afternoon, I would walk to find them.

I read these books and I was so engaged by them, when I planned my trip, I added a week in Scotland to go and see where they were. But even more

than the Hemingway, these are fictional characters, so as I'm walking through Inverness and Edinburgh, seeing the places that are mentioned in the book, I had to remind myself that I am looking at the houses of people who never actually existed in the first place.

We were in Marseilles, in the harbor, and you look across Chateau D'If...it's there! And I need to get a picture of it because, look, he was in there all those years, and they threw him out and didn't know he could swim, and, gosh, what a long way he had to swim, and again, I have to remind myself—he didn't exist.

Clarissa moves among the worlds of memoir, a real Paris inhabited by a real author, and those where fictional tales have been set in real places. Her reading inspires her to seek out the lived experience of sharing these spaces with characters she has admired, looking to understand them better by walking on their streets, gazing at distances they had to cover for survival. Her lived relationships with author or characters move her to action in the everyday world—to travel, to see, to experience a lifeworld that she has shared imaginatively—and her daily life becomes informed by that journey. Anzaldúa says of our imaginative lives, “The other mode of consciousness facilitates images from the soul and the unconscious through dreams and the imagination. Its work is labeled ‘fiction,’ make-believe, wish fulfillment” (2007, p. 59). Our being through books takes place at a borderland of our consciousness, where we reach across the threshold of imagination and dreams to connect with our souls.

Mariah speaks of the relationship between fiction and dreams, “Maybe fiction writing and dreaming are not unrelated.” She adds later, “That essence and the pre-dream mode are kind of related, in that they're a loosening of [the] definitive or exterior [idea of] who we are.” When we no longer define ourselves through our exterior, when we connect imaginatively, when we allow that consciousness of which Anzaldúa speaks to inform us, we forge pathways to our authentic being.

Another border-crossing experience of lived space is the interplay between the spot in which we hold the book and gaze at the pages and the lived space in which we are simultaneously experiencing the story. As Atwell-Vasey says, “We project our bodies into the time and space of the novel and we feel it or live it from there” (1998, p. 75). Anne speaks of the space in which we read as a sacred space. “In my family, people would leave you alone if you were reading. Reading was kind of a sacred place. And you were left alone if you were reading. That was something to be highly prized—being left alone in my family.” When asked to say more about what that means to her, she adds:

Well, I feel, especially when I’m—I was going to say, especially when I was a child, but I think it carries all through my adult life. There is a cocoon, like a cone of silence from Maxwell Smart. There is literally a space around you that is the reading space, and no one may intrude upon it. Of course, that’s not true; everybody intrudes upon it. But when you’re reading, you’re actively involved in something, and it’s not to be disturbed. I think that’s what I mean by a sacred place.

Anne expands upon the concept, using words often associated with religious experience:

What makes it a sacred space? I’m not sure, but I think it has to do with devotion. You’re devoted to that reading. Of course, that changes with what you’re reading, how you’re reading it, and what’s going on around you. When you’re the mother of young children, you don’t get much of that space. But it’s set-aside time, set-aside space, and you are devoted to the reading. I like that idea of devotion, and I think that’s one of those words that looking up the etymology will be very useful. I’m just trying to think of the other kinds of implications of sacred, something sacred. Certainly, there’s a specialness. Devotion is a very good way to express it. . . . In my family, if you were a reader, it was a special status. Reading was something so valued by my mother. I don’t think I ever saw my father read anything but a newspaper, but my mother read all the time. And I think it was a way of possibly anointing yourself. Reading was an initiation; you were taken into a special group of people.

Examining the etymology of devotion takes us to the Latin verb *dēvovēre*, to dedicate by vow (Barnhart, 1988, p. 273), and calls up the cognate of devout. Certainly, all participants were dedicated readers, acolytes of the written word, its power to

transport them, and its ability to transform their lives. The special status conferred by literacy and the love of literature that Anne identifies is transmitted to other readers as well. Reading is a valued activity, and other devotees are recognized as kindred spirits. We consider ourselves part of a special group anointed into a love for books, initiated by our discovery that something as simple as markings on paper can construct images, metaphors, worlds of wonder. We enter into those worlds, crossing and re-crossing the threshold of daily life/fiction to return to ourselves.

Both the time and space of reading take on sacred qualities, becoming places of haven in our often over-committed lives. Malone speaks of the power of reading to move us into sacred space:

Like systematic racism, distraction is not simply a matter of individual disposition and choice, but exists in, and is encouraged by the very structures of postmodern life. In such a culture, the stillness, silence, solitude, and focused attention that reading offers is to be prized; it may be the closest some of us get to a spirit of contemplation in the hurried, noisy, scattered lives we lead. (2003, p. 73)

In such sacred space, we find the detachment to quiet quotidian demands and to connect with the essence of our own being. We find the stillness, a silence that is not a denial of voice, but one that represents a peaceful space in which to reflect and to be open to whatever gifts our imaginative powers may want to bestow upon us. All participants are devout readers, claiming such space for ourselves because we have recognized how necessary such contemplation has become for our own sense of being. Aswell Doll describes the power of the sacred space we enter through fiction:

What is the magic of sacred space? It can be the shrine, the temple, the church that pilgrims seek; the quiet corner, the forest bower, the time out that others seek. There, set off, the seeker finds an age-long memoried self, that buried self, brought forward from its sleeping state by the power of imagination. (2000, p. 213)

Again, we see the relationship of imagination, self, and the sacred: a lived time and space that we experience as sacrosanct, a quietude that allows us to unbury our being.

Our being, however, does not exist only in imagination, but in a physical state as well. Atwell-Vasey notes, “The world is a temperature, a depth, a height, a brightness, a wetness, and so on, because we have skin, blood, appendages, eyes, and so forth” (1998, p. 69). We experience fictional lifeworlds with all our senses and our bodily being. Books offer us sensory as well as spiritual nourishment, as we find ourselves at another threshold—of fictional lifeworlds that are deeply experienced corporeally.

Lingual Literature: Melding Language, Sound, Taste

We speak of being voracious readers; we speak of being nourished by literature. We are not only devout; we devour books. Words not only resonate in our ears, but also appeal to our palates. The synthesis of senses that is our lived experience of reading feeds our minds and souls with morsels that are words. Several of us find language particularly important when we choose books, engaging our tongues in both language and savor. Aswell Doll says of such engagement with fictional language, “This attending means noting word selection, in the reverent belief that words contain angels; they are emissaries with etymologies” (2000, p. xv). Words become emissaries that guide us and invite us to enter fictional lifeworlds, providing delight as we are at once living imaginatively yet deeply embodied in such worlds—yet another threshold.

Of books as nourishment, Katherine laughingly says, “I eat books! They were breakfast, lunch, and dinner.” Mariah speaks of the way language and nourishment can be melded in reading. “A book that I really like frequently wins me over on the first sentence, and it’s because...what word, good words, do to me, is they affect my tongue

as though there was melted butter or melted chocolate, or something.” Later, she goes on to describe, “Books that I call—what do I call them —yummy.” Clarissa uses that same word when she talks of using time with a beloved book as a reward for a productive week. “And it’s a book that’s fiction and yummy and often one I’ve read before.” What makes books yummy? It seems that in our quest for nourishment, we also look for flavor.

Mariah gives further details about the importance of the book’s language and how it is used to draw the reader into the lifeworld of the book:

That opening line, I think, grabs me in language at the same time, or by the end of the first page, I’m already gone into my Walt Disney landscape, except it’s not Walt Disney, but as each author paints in their own way. Very distinctly, with particular palettes of words and different parts of the world. But I like to be in there, to be able to have a sense of all the different textures and space layout and smell.

Mariah touches upon the ways in which literature synthesizes manifold sensory inputs. Words fill a palette, something more often associated with colors. Textures join with olfactory contributions as we are placed within a new dwelling space. The very first sentences or first pages of a novel draw us into a landscape informed by the particular sensibility of the author, and we draw upon our own imagination to move within it.

We acknowledge that our presence in the fictional lifeworld may be perceived as absence in the daily one, and that words create that lifeworld but may cease to be perceived in it. “For to the reader the words and the pages they are printed on are transparent” (van Manen, 1985, p. 179). Clarissa echoes van Manen as she observes the way in which she enters into a fictional lifeworld:

The prologue was talking about puddles and when she was a young girl, she would be afraid to step into the puddles because the sky was mirrored in them, and she was afraid she would fall right through. And I was thinking, well, that’s much like these books...Because you could fall into [them], and it takes effort and will to crawl out of them, until you hit the

eject button on the very last page...Some books, you sit down with them...and it sort of happens to you, like the fog comes down around you but a new world opens up and you become less aware of the environment and the sounds, and the people, and anyone else... You miss turning the oven off when you were supposed to and you miss answering the phone and the doorbell...It's not [that] the world becomes dark, but it opens up into—it's weird—the words on the page no longer exist. I don't remember reading words sometimes.

In another conversation, Clarissa uses the same metaphor of a fog descending. "Because also one of the experiences when you're reading a book, sort of a fog descends and curtains come all around you. I know when I travel, that's easy, because I become by traveling." In what ways might we become by traveling back and forth, across the lifeworlds? How might we dwell in those worlds of words? Words open up worlds that entice us into greater understanding of others and ourselves. We may wander through the fog, where our vision may be clouded for a while, but trust that we will return to our own being, having learned something in our peregrination.

A paradox of dwelling in word-worlds is that, while we often may not perceive words directly because we are living in the middle of them, language is deeply important to readers. Clarissa speaks of the power of the written word:

We talk about moments of action that are epiphany, but sometimes there are sentences that are epiphany... Some sentences—a really good sentence, it burns; it's like a piece of paper, and how can the page actually hold it? It must put a hole into it...And sometimes the really good sentences, they do strike you, but they're not just words, they're not just language, they're alive in their own way. And there's a voice, but it's not my voice. And...it's not like watching a movie, but you know what they look like, the people. And you're there. And the sensations described in the book become more real than what you're experiencing. I mean, I could be sitting on the couch, but I don't feel my body on the couch, I feel my body wherever I am in the book, in the place.

We em-body the words and we em-body the worlds to which they bring us. Mariah describes her experience of embodying the act of reading as she indicates various areas of her brain, commenting on the left-brain/right-brain engagement:

What reading does for me—it's almost like I take this...Fabergé egg in my brain out of my working brain...it's what gets to deal with literature...To continue the analogy, I open it and the treasure pours in, and then it gets to close and hold all the treasures. And it works for me because it feels like this whole part of my brain gets involved; both sides kind of get involved...and it's this part, not all of this anxious, worrying part here.

Later in the conversation, she returns to the Fabergé egg image and her description of the lived body of her imagination:

I have to read at night, and to let my imagination start to loosen up. And that, I think is that Fabergé egg thing, because for me, the imagination is very—it's like it happens back here and starts swirling around back and forth, and I feel brain activity in my imagination. And then that starts going on, because you have to reactivate the whole...It's like a sacred grove.

What a rich cluster of images are here—the Fabergé egg, a precious gift encrusted with jewels that reveals secret riches when opened; the treasures that pour into the brain from literature; and a return to space named as sacred, a grove we visit as imaginative beings.

We are emplaced within the world of words through words that may be visible or invisible. This interplay of lifeworlds becomes a space within we can address our consciousness of ourselves. Mariah ponders the ability of fiction to use such embodiment and emplacement to re-turn us to the essence of our being. “And I was just wondering if, when we read...it kind of puts us into that private, essence part of ourselves.” We dwell within deeply experienced fictional lifeworlds, opening up possibilities for us to come to deep self-knowledge.

Like Mariah, Clarissa mixes senses of vision and taste in describing her experience of moving within fictional worlds:

The words are just there, and it seems silly to say make pictures in my head. I don't think I make pictures in my head, but somehow I know what everybody looks like. And if it's well done, you know how it smells and feels and shiver, get hungry, crave food. Hemingway —oh, I feel like a lush when I read Hemingway, because within ten pages, I'm thinking, oh, I need a cocktail, a little Pernod; it's just the way he writes. And in college, we read some Defoe or something, and I started craving bread and cheese because the guy in the book was always eating bread and cheese.

Clarissa goes on to describe how the cravings engendered by reading move her to action:

I think there have been times when I'm reading a book, stop and go to the grocery store, get it, and bring it back. In the Scottish series, they're always drinking whiskey, tasting whiskey, making whiskey. Finally, I went down to a little French bistro near my house and said, "I need a single malt." I'd never had a single malt in my entire life, but clearly, I couldn't put the experience off any longer because I really wanted to really know what the characters were tasting when they tasted it.

Once again, we move between two worlds, transferring experiences from one to enrich our experience in the other, mingling senses and realms of being. Clarissa feels the temperature of the worlds authors create, and wants to share the sensory experiences of the characters. She is moved to taste something new to her, driven by the power of prose to make such an experience attractive. Through something that attracts us in the fictional world, we hunger or thirst for new experiences in the real one. Reading engenders such desires and gives us a preview of how it might feel to follow up on them. Our worlds are expanded.

Malone acknowledges the ways in which language builds dwelling spaces for us and the effects of our movements to and from such places "We travel to different lands without leaving home. We note the apt observation, the pithy phrase. We are arrested by beautiful prose, its cadences and rhythm. The design and scope of the great literary works

that embrace whole worlds, both within and without, astonish us” (2003, p. 96). Fiction works upon the worlds within us to affect the world without, deepening our lived experience in both.

Katherine speaks about the range of narrative voices that we perceive in novels and the ways in which we experience them as specific elements of sound:

The book voice can be kind of —*Moby Dick*, you know, the book voice is a gravelly, sea-worn narrative, whereas *Little Women*, that’s that developing female, where she goes from the child voice to the adult. Jo, for example, that voice changes as the book goes on, whereas with *Moby Dick*, I would guess is pretty static in the tone, in the inflection. And the emotion changes as you read, but the person remains pretty consistent, where with *Little Women*, she’s experiencing and feeling, and she’s got her own range.

What are the varieties of voices we can hear through novels, and how do they help us to find our own voices? Van Manen and Levering note, “From the point of view of everyday experience, identity seems to emerge in concrete situations with others as a kind of immanent self-knowledge; it refers to who I am, to what makes it possible to say, ‘I’” (1996, p. 93). For readers, our concrete fictional experiences call forth our self-understanding. We learn to say “I” as we hear the voices of authors and characters and enter into dialogue with them to speak our own stories.

The sensory input we receive from reading is not limited to what we can hear or say, the language or sound or taste of books. Participants also speak eloquently of how their senses of sight and touch are engaged by fiction and by the books themselves.

See Me, Feel Me: Books as Visual and Tactile Objects

What first draws us to a particular book? For several participants, even before they move on to the words, the language of the book’s opening, the cover can call to us. As we wander through a bookstore, we peruse the offerings on the “New and

Noteworthy” or “3 for 2” tables, and often pick up the books that have caught our eye with a design that speaks to us. It may be an illustration, a type face, or a combination of the two that appeals to us; something about this volume leads me to believe that I want to know more about what is inside. Katherine describes her first encounter with an author who became a favorite: “What grabbed me was that when I first found the book, the cover had a horse on the front.” Mariah talks of the visual pleasure of choosing a book, “And I got a beautiful paperback version. It’s got a silver cover.” Conversely, though, Clarissa writes about reencountering a favorite book from childhood:

I decided to check out a copy of *The Witch* as well and was delighted to find, tucked in among the new editions, a 1986 reprint of the original 1958 hardcover, with Kit, the protagonist, etched in blues and grays against the Meadows she so often visits in the story.

My first readings of *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* were of the 1958 first edition, with that beautiful memorable cover...I remember NOT checking out *The Witch* for years, because I assumed it was a scary ghost story given the title and the gloomy colors of the cover. When I finally did check it out, having read my way through the rest of the options in that tiny library, I was surprised and unexpectedly delighted by the discovery that it was a historical novel rich with a story that pulled me in without any effort on my part.

Perhaps that cliché about not judging a book by its cover has some truth, although it is clear that the look and feel of the books themselves are important to participants. Several of us grew up with Modern Library editions of classics and recall their distinctive bindings. A chance look at a *Reader’s Digest* condensed volume in a secondhand bookstore can conjure up shelves of my grandmother’s library. A book’s cover can remind us of another one we’ve enjoyed, convey something about the emotional stance of the story, or intrigue us by promising new experience. Our eyes are gateways to our interest, drawn or deterred by imagery, typeface, and texture.

The look and feel of a book is evocative, particularly for the books we read as children. Clarissa recalls the homely appeal of Little Golden Books, purchased at the supermarket as rewards for good behavior. Ms. Wordsmith speaks of *Little Women*:

I had several editions. The last one I remember that I had was a very handsome book with a slipcover and tinted illustrations. And there's such detail in the illustrations, of the family life, and the clothes, and the bucolic scenes in the country and things like that. Again, I think there was that idealized family life that I didn't have.

Not only do words create a palette of images for us, the images offered by certain editions of books can be powerful as well. They clearly add to our sensory experience of the individual book. In Chapter 2, I describe an edition of *A Little Princess* (Hodgson Burnett, 1905/1990) as having the “right” illustrations. For me, those are the ones that visualize most strongly my own vision of Sara's person, the garret where she suffers, and the London that surrounds her story. My entry into Sara's world is facilitated by these visual cues, and my insight into that particular lifeworld is clarified.

Our experience of books contains strong tactile elements as well. Ms. Wordsmith brings along a well-worn copy of *Jane Eyre* to one conversation:

I picked up this book here, and I remember what it looked like and, what it felt like, because I too had that wonderful physical feeling of a new book, or at least a book that was new to me, and opening it up and the pages were sort of cool and creamy, stiff pages. You get to the point where you can also tell when books had been published in Britain, because they had this slightly different feel to them.

A flimsy paperback is not the same as a hefty hardcover. The rough paper of a mass-market paperback contrasts with smoother trade versions. Our hands are as engaged in reading as our eyes are. Sense by sense, we are drawn into a new experience, and it becomes a part of our ongoing project of becoming ourselves.

Anne describes another instance of noting and delighting in the physical qualities of a particular book, “I don’t remember what book it was recently that I was reading; the pages were such high-quality paper, and they were smooth, and I’d read along the left-hand side, and I’d be stroking the right-hand side, and I’d read the right-hand side, and I’d be stroking.” For most participants, the physical interaction with a book was an important part of the reading experience. Only the youngest and most technologically oriented participant was a fan of electronic books, although another commented that they could be useful for nonfiction, but unsuitable for fiction reading. As Maureen Corrigan observes, “Book lovers always have to touch books” (2005, p. 58).

For Anne, the experience starts with holding the book. “The picking up—this is for hardbacks mostly—picking it up, you’ve got the heft of it in your hand.” Katherine describes the ways we imprint ourselves upon the books we read and reread:

Here’s where your thumb catches the page every time, and you can see it, and that is your book because it does that. If somebody else picked up the book and they read it, their thumb may hit the same spot, but because they have a different reading experience, it probably won’t. And they will see that book differently because it’s coming to them in a different light, whereas to you, this is an old friend, this is something that’s been with you forever and you can always go back to it because the words never change, but how you look at them does.

As books become part of our lives, they fit themselves to us. We lug them from household to household, we throw them into a car, or drop them into a bathtub. Their pages become worn, the bindings crack and fade, and yet they are treasured possessions that make up an essential part of the landscape of our lived worlds. “Books are necessary cargo” (Corrigan, 2005, p. 181). We carry them with us as reminders of who we are. The shelves in our homes become emblematic of our identity. I know that the books I select to be displayed in my living room are those I am willing to be perceived as part of my

public persona. The books from my childhood, the genre mysteries, and the drama collections from my youth are in more private spaces, reflecting my desire to reveal only so much about myself to those who enter my home. We also use our books to retain pieces of ourselves in places we move from. Clarissa speaks of keeping some of her childhood series books in her parents' house after she has left, "So I sort of kept them there as touchstones." Such touchstones ground us in our own being, reminding us of where we've been; our libraries can be talismanic.

Katherine comments, "Whether paperback, hardback, thin child's book or some weighty Tolstoy tome—when you have a book that you want to read and you want to get into, it brings its own kind of lightness to you." The heft of a good book becomes a lightness for our souls. In taking up the weight of these volumes, we are enlightened. Our ideas about ourselves are clarified, and our ideas about the world are illuminated. We dwell at the threshold of such enlightenment, which can free us, and embodiment, which can anchor us in rich, sensory experiences.

Senses and Sensibilities: Multiple Senses in Reading

It is clear from participants' comments that the fictional lifeworld is a vividly inhabited one, and one where the appeal is not just to one sense at a time, but a multiplicity of sensory cues and evocations that create that striking world. Mariah comments on the swirl of mixed sensory input and the way in which, once again, the fictional world engenders action in the quotidian one:

It's a lot visual and smell, and if I can picture myself in space so that I feel in it—sound less than anything else, although authors will talk about sound. It's more like you land on a country road, and everything's around. You know, how does it smell, how is the light, how is the space? Laura Ingalls, for example—I remember reading *The Long, Cold Winter* while we were having a heat wave in DC, and I was so cold that I had to get my

winter coat out of the attic and wear it for a half-hour. I was so cold. That was very odd.

When Mariah describes this incident, I recall being unable to read Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as a teenager, because we were in the middle of a heat wave and I was convinced that the book was giving me brain-fever. Katherine says of the way she experiences books, "I feel like books have kind of textures and flavors and tones just like food or movies or music. They're definitely a multi-sensory experience."

Authors who draw us into their lifeworlds are able to use our senses effectively to make those worlds present to us. Mariah comments:

And Proust does deliberately —does like a surround-sound of sensory... What I noticed was there was a little line where he jangled his change in his dressing gown pocket, and I went wait, that's a lot of sense he's got going, because he's talking about the glinting, and the cream...and checked: has he covered all five senses? Because that was—and he had.

H. Peter Steeves observes, "Perception is always art, and appearance is not something to get around. To understand the being of things is to understand how they are presented" (2006, p. 86). We perceive through our senses, experiencing sight, sound, smell, temperature, texture, taste, and through our lived body begin the presenting of the fictional world. Derived from the present participle of the Latin *praeesse*, itself a construction from *prae*, before, and *esse*, to be, "presence" carries the sense of being before a person or thing, of being at-hand (Barnhart, 1988, p. 834). Authors draw us into fictional lifeworlds through our senses, and those worlds become present-at-hand to us in ways that encourage our inhabiting them deeply.

Abram describes the interplay between our senses and perception:

My senses connect up with each other in the things I perceive, or rather each perceived thing gathers my sense together in a coherent way, and it is

this that enables me to experience the thing itself as a center of forces, as another nexus of experience...so we now discern, within the act of perception, a participation between the various sensory systems of the body itself. Indeed, these events are not separable, for the intertwining of my body with the things it perceives is effected only through the interweaving of my sense, and vice versa. (1996, p. 62)

The connection of our senses to fiction engenders our perception and presentencing as we participate in our own becoming. Our vivid sensory existence in books intertwines with our daily lives, moving us into an enriched nexus of experience. The boundaries between real and imaginary become permeable, and we begin to understand not only the being of the books, but our own being. We start to become present to ourselves. Mariah speaks of how reading supports her becoming as almost a sort of deconstruction:

It sort of opens—makes you more permeable or something. It makes your essence more permeable. And then what happens is—it's not that one character goes in exactly, but different aspects of the book do sort of come into that permeable space and find their place within your essence.

We find ourselves at another reality/fiction threshold, where our permeability can be penetrated by reading. Nevertheless, the characteristics we acquire from fiction must be emplaced within our own essentiality, that core of our being in which we define ourselves as unique. The selves we perceive as possible when we read intertwine with our embodied selves, and our deep dwelling in fictional lifeworlds can bring us back into self-reflection and formation of relationship with our authentic selves. We are constantly in relationship when we read—with characters, with authors, with other readers, and, ultimately, with ourselves.

Lived Relationships of Reading

Reading involves us in multiple relationships, a kaleidoscopic array of connections. For participants, these relationships have constantly changed and evolved,

sustaining them through their becoming and enriching their lives. We are not only individuals, but persons in relationship with other persons. We use what we learn through fiction to inform and negotiate our being-toward one another. Heidegger claims, “The disclosedness of the *Mitda-sein* of others which belongs to being-with means that the understanding of others already lies in the understanding of Being of *Da-sein* because its being is being-with” (1953/1996, p. 116). Fiction both discloses others to us and discloses us to ourselves. In our book-worlds, we find many ways of being-with and being-toward. Characters are not only role models that demonstrate qualities and characteristics to which we can aspire, but also cherished companions on the roads of our own life journeys. Authors become guides in our exploration of our own being. We recognize our kinship with other readers, those who share our love of books and the ability to live within them. As we participate in these connections, forming bonds with one another, we also engage with our own selfhood.

Relationships with Characters

Participants speak with great fondness of the fictional characters they cherish. In the conversations, it became very clear how important these relationships can be, and how real someone like Jane Eyre or Anne of Green Gables can be to us. Clarissa asserts, “They live! And they’re friends. Definitely a relationship. I felt like I knew them and they had supported me in some strange way.” We interact with fictional beings in the same ways we do with those we encounter in the everyday world. We support them, exhort them, share their sorrows and their joys. We work out complex issues of our own personal identity through taking on or rejecting the characteristics they embody that we admire or find objectionable. Mariah talks about rejecting what she saw in a Proustian

character as he moved from being an engaging child to a repellent adolescent. “I just don’t want to take him in! To take him on... it’s too close to home that I was a bigger jerk than I want to look at when I was a teenager.” Earlier in this chapter, ways in which characters can become role models have been delineated. Characters can also show us who we do not want to be, or who we have been and have wanted to change.

Clarissa explains the safety she feels with her companions in the fictional world, “And that’s why I think I love them—because they’re my friends, but they’re also my friends who are not going to criticize me and they reveal a little bit about myself to myself.” She goes on to identify one of the attractions of fictional relationships, in the insight they can give us into ourselves. “What I love—the characters that I love are the ones who are a little bit of who I think I am, but also reflect, even more so, who I would like to be.” Once again, we move from the window, where we see a character with qualities we wish to emulate, to the mirror, where we look for such qualities in ourselves.

These relationships continue from childhood through the trajectory of our lives. Characters become valued companions in our own journeys, and we return again and again to those who hold the greatest meaning for us. Most participants are avid re-readers, not only maintaining and deepening their relationships with those characters, but enjoying the opportunity to re-inhabit the worlds in which they met and to dwell there as returning residents. Clarissa says, “It’s like I want to go back and renew my relationship with the people so I’m back in that world again.” She acknowledges, however, that her experience of that world will be different each time. “I go back to them partly for the comfort, the security blanket, of hanging out with Anne of Green Gables again, or Elizabeth Bennet again, but the most fun of it is to go back because I’m different. So,

because I'm different, they are different." The characters are not static, but reflect our own personal evolution.

We return to specific novels again and again, learning something new about them and ourselves in the process. Mariah speaks of "the books we go back to—the ones that make us more of who we are." Clarissa describes the choices she makes in selecting such reading, "So I go back and I like to read the epiphany moments—the moments when they made an insight or discovery or a choice, or accomplished a goal." "Epiphany" derives from the Greek *epipháneia*, meaning manifestation or display (Barnhart, 1988, p. 336), and has taken on the sense of enlightenment or illumination in English usage. We come to our own epiphanies along with the characters who are so enlightened. For Clarissa, re-experiencing such moments helps her to clarify her own goals and to examine where she is in her life in terms of accomplishing the goals she has set heretofore. Touchstones in the lives of characters reflect the benchmarks of her own.

In the group conversation, Ms. Wordsmith talks of how we experience the same book differently at different points of our lives:

It sounds as if you're saying—and I think this is true for myself too—that going back over things that you've read, especially as you get older, you take in more of the characters or different aspects of them because of your lived experience. Ophelia means something to you at a certain point or a certain age or emotional situation, but then something you've gone through makes you respond more to the person who's experiencing loss. And so you can have all these different characters in the book that you're reading as aspects of yourself that are more relevant to you at different places in your life. So I think that that's the thing about rereading the printed word...there's something new to pull out of that. That you didn't see before, because you weren't ready for it before. Whatever it might be.

The relationships change as we change. We move from being naïve, like Ophelia, to being more world-weary, like Gertrude. In having suffered losses, we empathize more

deeply with characters who mourn. Just as we may never enter the same river twice, we don't really reread the same book, because of what we have lived in the meantime.

Katherine speaks about the beginning of her relationship with Mary Lennox of *The Secret Garden*. "Mary was really this—she was this friend, she was someone I had adventures with, she was someone I met new people with, broke the rules with...I was an eldest sibling—you don't get to do very often." For the child Katherine, Mary was a companion whose adventurous spirit allowed her to stretch her familial designation into a larger sphere of identity. Even in her youngest years, Katherine experienced some progression in this relationship. "The more I felt attached to Mary, the more it became kind of a give-and-take, less of a lead-follow. So Mary would lead and then I would say in reading or in imagining, oh, yeah, that's cool, let's go over here too."

At times, the relationship changes, and we may choose not to follow a beloved character down their path. Anne talks about how she has returned time and again to the first book in the *Anne of Green Gables* series, but refuses to read the subsequent volumes. "But it was like she was grown. She was all—all the edges were smoothed off. All the edges were smoothed off and she was grown and it wouldn't be interesting any more." For Anne, the wild and untamed fictional Anne was attractive, but the more conventional, more adult character was of little interest.

While we may grow apart from characters who are early role models, we sometimes return to them later in life. Katherine speaks of such a shifting relationship with the character Meg in Madeline L'Engle's books:

When I was 13, I probably related very strongly with Meg. She was very familiar and I felt comfortable reading about her trials and tribulations because she was that familiar face. She was kind of the reflection in the

mirror. Whereas now...I still enjoy reading about her, but it's not so much that relation any more.

She goes on to observe, however, that, while she no longer sees as much of herself in the high-school version of Meg, the Meg of a third book in the series is perhaps closer to where she is now and where she would like to be:

And so she's developed into this—she even says in the third book, I'll never be a beauty like Mother, but I think I've come into my own, or something like that. She has that appreciation for herself. That's the stage I'm getting to; I'm not there yet...I related to Book One when I was in middle school and had that kind of ugly duckling mentality, that girls who really focused in math and science and enjoyed it mentally...then going into the high school thing and being a little more comfortable in my skin and understanding...I'm not quite at the third book yet, so I think I'm between relation[ships] with her but I've always been able to look at the character of Meg and go, hey, that's a lot like me.

Just as our selves are not static, our identifications with characters are fluid. We move from uncomfortable adolescence into an adulthood that brings us understanding; suddenly, we are no longer the odd, ugly-duckling youngster, but a more mature person who has come to terms with who she is. Instead of empathizing with a young Meg, we see ourselves mirrored more by a version of Meg who has moved forward in her life.

Katherine speaks of the pleasures to be derived from revisiting characters and the worlds they inhabit:

By rereading these oldies but goodies, you start to become more appreciative of the facets that the characters bring to your life because then you can go back and say, yeah, you know, I had this rough day, and it's made me gloomy and blah, and maybe if I read something kind of energized, I'll feel a little better, or maybe if I read something where somebody else is going through problems of their own, I'll empathize with them, and then in my head, they're empathizing with me.

This mutual empathy we experience nourishes our relationships and feeds our own souls. Our fictional friends can change our moods, energize us, or simply provide an outlet for

our curiosity about differing lifeworlds. The time we spend with our fictional friends can refresh us as we feel that they understand our own tribulations and offer us their empathy.

A couple of participants mention prolonging the relationship with a character by continuing the narrative imaginatively. Katherine admits, “There are plenty of times where I’ve read the book and I’ll close it and I’ll extrapolate the ending in my head. Then I’ll read it again and I’ll close it and I’ll come up with a different ending that I’m happier with.” Clarissa describes a similar activity, “I couldn’t read in the car—I got carsick—so, in the car, I liked to be silent. My mother would literally tell me, you’re so frustrating, you don’t talk in the car. I’d use it as a chance to make up my own sequels. And so I would extend my favorite stories.” When we find a comfortable fictional lifeworld, populated by congenial characters, we look for ways to extend our stay and to spend more time with the friends we have discovered.

Overwhelmingly, this group of women identified with female characters. It was rare to find a male character who engaged their attachment, although Ms. Wordsmith, to her surprise, found one in Holden Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye*:

And again, this was a character I could relate to, but he was a guy, he was a boy, and I didn’t usually seek out any books where the boy was the hero. I read some books where they might be in it, but—so here’s this guy at the prep school, and I just—somehow Salinger just made that character universal.

An icon of mid-20th-Century American youth, Holden is perhaps a good guide to the world of adolescent alienation, and one to whom girls can relate as well as boys. Mariah, on the other hand, rejects the notion of bonding with young males. “It’s hard to identify with them...I wouldn’t even read books about boys. They just bored me to death.” In the characters with whom we identify and those who do not engender such connection, we

find the mirrors where we can see ourselves reflected, or we can look out to others through windows that open differing ways of being. Some of us were occasionally drawn to such masculine environments as the whale-hunting *Pequod* or the treasure-hunting *Hispaniola*, even if we were only visitors there, but all of us were at home in myriad settings where we found girls and women who taught us how to be ourselves, whether we were like or unlike them. In engaging with these characters and moving within these worlds, we also enter into relationship with their creators, the authors of the books in which we dwell so enthusiastically.

Relationships with Authors

All participants mention their inclination, when they have enjoyed a book, to seek out other works by that same author. Most read all available works by an author when they have found one whose work appeals to them. These can include prolific novelists such as Agatha Christie, Joyce Carol Oates, or Charles Dickens, authors of genre series such as Sue Grafton or the late Robert B. Parker, and authors of classic works such as Jane Austen. Before my leisure reading time was severely curtailed by the demands of graduate school, I made a practice of reading all the works of Jane Austen and the novels of Robertson Davies every year. These are comfortable relationships, where we feel we can rely upon the authors, and trust them to provide us with experiences that we find satisfying and want to repeat. Authors are cicerones who bring us into expanded lifeworlds, open the windows to experiences outside our own, and guide us in returning to our mirrors to see what has been disclosed about our own being.

Alice Hoffman describes how amazing she finds her reaction to reading *The Catcher in the Rye*: “I had never had this kind of literary experience before—the gut-

wrenching interactiveness of fiction. The sense that while reading someone else's creation, you, as a reader and as a person, are miraculously known and revealed" (2006, p. 84). Such a *coup de foudre* can entice us into deep relationship with an author who can touch us so deeply through the written page that we believe we are seen and heard, and become revealed to ourselves. We are drawn to authors whose work allows us to name genuinely what we live.

Ms. Wordsmith speaks with wonderment of how she feels that Charlotte Bronte has communicated directly with her, across time and space:

I mean, it's amazing. Here's this author, speaking across a span of more than a hundred years ago, in a setting that's entirely different from mine, and yet, this something that just hooked into how I was feeling immediately. And that was a very strong expression of that, but all the books we've talked about, with all that parts of it that are together in a composite, sort of told my life.

Margot Livesey finds the same self-revelation in *Jane Eyre*: "Jane Eyre speaks to the secret, vulnerable part of ourselves that has little to do with age or gender or race or situation...I recognized that part of myself and felt recognized in turn. That recognition changed my life" (2006, p. 108). The authors with whom we connect deeply speak to our souls, to the essence of our being. They give voice to what we cannot say, paint the pictures we are unable to create. They tell us our own lives, which we recognize with a sense of shock, especially when the story being told is not contemporary, not emplaced as we are, not populated by our neighbors. Nevertheless, an author can express the yearnings we feel, the sorrows that pierce us, and the hopes we dare to dream.

Participants speak of a mix of female and male authors, albeit weighted toward women. There is some questioning of whether male authors portray women characters

successfully, but consensus that skilled writing doesn't necessarily know gender boundaries. Mariah comments:

Thomas Hardy has proved himself to me as a feminist over and over and over again. His women are real, his women are strong. Society—he seems able to capture its foibles lovingly but still sternly so that you can really get a sense of the intelligence, of the struggle, of the resilience of his characters.

Such sensitivity allows Hardy to gain her trust, and she continues the relationship by returning to his books at different points in her life. In a later conversation, she says:

Hardy is just, to me, one of the most courageous of men because he refused to make his books appealing in a popular way. They're really hard. And they're really pure. And they're beautiful. Somehow he invests them with the beauty that tragedy can have. I think about his characters all the time, and I don't know why... he has been a very helpful person to me. And I think of him as a person.

Authors become persons to us, in relationships created through literary engagement.

While they may be separated from us in time and space, we enter into conversation with them, follow as they beckon us into new places, emerge from our encounters with deepened re-cognition of others and ourselves. While we may be fortunate enough now and then to become acquainted with or attend a program by living authors—one of my prized possessions is a volume signed by Robertson Davies at a reading in Boston—for the most part, these are important relationships conducted remotely. As a group of readers, we also have significant relationships we encounter in our daily lives, with other enthusiastic readers and with those who introduce us to a love of reading.

Relationships with Readers

Participants are readers not only as individuals, but in relationship to other readers. In most cases, family members were readers, even described as “voracious” readers. One woman speculates that she might not have become involved with her

husband had he not been a reader. The pleasures of sharing books, recommending books, and discussing them with family members are recounted with affection. Readers seem to be favored friends as well. Anne comments on the attractions of other readers:

It's a special club...there's a presumption of intelligence. There's also presumption of curiosity, of that wanting to know something that you don't know. One of the metaphors I'm using for my work is the quest...you go on a quest to answer a question. You go on a quest to find out something that you do not know. So, you kind of understand that this person is a curious person, this person has an intellectual life that might be compatible with your own.

She also characterizes the delight she takes in recognizing another reader as a connoisseur of the same literature, "We'll take other readers. I love—have you read? Yes, I have. Ah! Everybody has that squeal and...didn't you just love? So that's one relationship I think reading defines." We enter into relationship as denizens of a shared fictional lifeworld and often discover shared values, shared experiences, and shared growth through such dwelling. Schwartz describes such rapport:

Occasionally when I mention *A Little Princess* I find someone who is startled into rapt recall, and we exchange a look of recognition...What we dreamed together, in whatever distant places we grew up, was of something amorphous—large, open, and exotic—something for which there was no room at home and even less at school. We groped for the knowledge *A Little Princess* confers, which is that we truly are what we feel ourselves to be, that we can trust our inner certainty regardless of how others perceive us or what they wish us to become.

Schwartz articulates the connection we forge when we find readers who have appreciated the insights that have been important to us. When we share such dreams, we bond through our inner lives. As seekers of knowledge, we find companionship for our existential journey, and receive assurances of the validity of our self-perception from those who have trod the same paths.

As readers, we are eager to draw others into the fictional lifeworlds where we feel most at home. In the group conversation, Anne notes, “Part of myself—my understanding of myself as a reader—is wanting to share—wanting to share what I know... I want to, I guess, give you what I have as reader.” Clarissa expands upon the ubiquity of our impulse to bond with bibliophiles:

I think by loving books, it’s also something where you find the other people who love books. Like I know on airplanes and on trains, you get into a conversation with people who become your friends based on what they’re reading next to you. I’ve done transatlantic flights where we just sit together—the person I’ve never met before—and trade books that each other must read. So part of the pleasure of reading books is the pleasure of talking to other people about the books you’ve all read.

Wherever we discover the readers who become part of our circle, in brief encounters, in lifelong friendships, in family connections, in epiphanies of insights from beloved childhood books, we form attachments to those who can understand the journeys we have undertaken and how fiction has guided us. We look for what they are willing to reveal about themselves in exploring what books have meant to them. We transcend daily lives that may be remote from one another and join in a mutual crossing of thresholds to find one another and ourselves. For many of us, the portals to fictional worlds are opened to us through places where we find deep respect and appreciation for reading.

Library as Temple and Palace

Clearly, some of the most important, impressive, and unforgettable relationships with other readers take place in the civic space of the public library. For those of us out-of-place in our general communities, libraries are the sites where we can claim our true citizenship within the populace of readers. Every participant speaks with a sense of awe about the worlds that libraries open. All were dedicated library patrons, usually weekly

visitors, starting in childhood. They developed relationships with librarians in particular, guides to the possibilities in books, who encouraged their curiosity and nourished them with words. Several mention being allowed to check out adult books because the librarians knew them well enough to judge that they had moved beyond the limits of the children's collection. Katherine expresses some sympathy for a childhood librarian, "The librarian in my old elementary school was probably the most harassed person in the world by me. I was down there every week, on the dot, had to have my book." In adulthood, we appreciate greatly the patience, wisdom, and enthusiasm of those who allowed us to wander within the riches these palaces offered and responded imaginatively to our yearning for knowledge, adventure, and solace.

Ms. Wordsmith talks of spending childhood Saturdays at the main public library in her Midwestern city, "I just loved the look of the library, and the height of the ceiling space, and order, and the books just waiting for me!" We remember the libraries of our youth with great fondness, recalling the coolness of brick walls, the aroma of old books, the prospect of shelf after shelf arrayed with the volumes that awaited our choosing them to transport us into new lifeworlds.

In rural settings, the library might not be a building. Deborah found the same bonding with another book lover and the same sense of opening worlds in a bookmobile:

Oh, it was just great. I became friends with the librarian. And it was just probably what you'd call a step van, like a UPS van, just filled with books...Around fourth grade, I went through this pony/horse-crazy thing—you know, Misty of Chincoteague—all of those...So she knew that and she would make sure that those were there for me – as well as other nature books. I remember [they were] really interesting, and they were all fiction, but still had a lot of facts and things about birds and about octopuses and about dolphins and whales. And it was just such—it was like the highlight of my week! To go there and she would have these books set aside for me, and...90% of them I would just love....She really

fostered and encouraged my love of nature, which I think is a big component of who I am.

For many of us, librarians were the wise women who initiated us into the sorority of readers, adepts who directed our development as novices in the world of print.

Particularly for those in difficult family situations, the library was a safe haven, a place where adults were benevolent instead of frightening. The rows of books, neatly shelved, imposed a sense of order in lives that could be chaotic. For Ms. Wordsmith, the sense of safety was both figurative and literal:

I think I used the word “orderly.” I’d also use the word “safety” in connection with the library... There were all these personages and personalities around me and—I felt welcome there. I guess that’s the sense of safety; I felt welcome to be there. And I guess also physical safety too. I remember I was around 15, I think it was. In the summertime, it was regular tornado season. And I remember once, a tornado came very close to downtown. And we had to go down into the—way down into the stacks and storage part of the library until the tornado passed. So I just thought of this as a place of refuge, of comfort, order, and it was good part of my life growing up.

When we feel unsafe at home, the library can be a refuge, a sanctuary. The solidity of a building that can protect us from a tornado provides a strong foundation for building our own sense of ourselves. As it offers us manifold views of being, multiple worlds to inhabit, and a myriad of potential friends, all available to us through the volumes spread before us, our library becomes yet another sacred space, where we can connect to others who are willing to share the wisdom to be found in books. Many of us find such connection not only in the library, but also in the schoolroom.

Teachers as Book-Givers

Librarians were not the only adults who encouraged young readers. Participants were also fortunate to have teachers who were caring and encouraging. Part of their

becoming was blossoming under the tutelage of educators who stepped beyond the classroom to reach out to them. Clarissa was introduced to a wider world:

We had Scottish nuns, we didn't have American nuns, and I think they knew about what was going on in my home and they would have me over on the weekends to watch movies and cook and... Oh, one—I actually tried to see her in Scotland this summer, but her mother had cancer—I was going to spend some time with her. She drove me to the nearest big town, where the library had two floors; it had stairs! She'd steer a lot of books my way... That was the nun who told me I reminded her of Anne of Green Gables, which, in fifth grade, that is the highest, the best thing I ever heard and I thought, okay, all right. Because I would definitely have waves of depression in those years, and that was one of the things that I thought, okay, I can do this if I'm like Anne of Green Gables, I could have this.

A teacher who is sensitive to the needs of her student attends to her development in several arenas, nourishing her with both food and words. She transports her to a larger library, that hallowed space for readers. She encourages the relationship of reader and character. Here we see an example of someone who practices the sort of teaching that Greene describes, “But I am convinced that through reflective and impassioned teaching we can do far more to excite and stimulate many sorts of young persons to reach beyond themselves, to make meanings, to look through wider and more informed perspectives at the actualities of their lives” (1995, p. 172). Clarissa's teacher provides new perspectives through windows into expanded space for growth and exploration, and a mirror that allows her to claim Anne's desirable qualities for her own.

Ms. Wordsmith describes the support she received from teachers in defining herself as a reader:

I had wonderful teachers throughout my formative years who really helped me in many ways and saw some qualities in me. And I may not remember them putting specific books in my hand, but just their encouragement to me, and that reading was—reading was a worthwhile and fine activity even if all of my peers wouldn't spend a lot of time doing it.

Mariah continues the tales of supportive and sensitive educators:

I had a wonderful teacher in 10th grade, and I said, I feel so ignorant and I want to be a great lady, and she said...all you need to do is write a list of ten books a year. Just look on the back of a classics jacket and write ten books that you want to read, and read them! And you'll educate yourself. So I did.

Both participants use the word “wonderful,” which comes to us through the Old English *wundor*, meaning marvel or marvelous thing (Barnhart, p. 1243). In wonder, we marvel, and we can also admire, be astonished, be awed. As we are encouraged to become readers and to become ourselves by the teachers who take heed of our potential, we are opened to lives and possibilities that can be wonder-full. Such teachers attain our admiration; we are awed by their capacity to care.

Not all adults who help to form readers in the educational setting need be teachers, as Katherine points out when she describes having books recommended to her. “You have that one teacher or that one parent who helps in the classroom, or that one lunch person...you have that one adult that first says, here, why don't you check this out?” The caring relationship of an experienced reader who nurtures a developing one is available to us in many places, and those of us who are committed readers discover many ways to connect with one another. We stand at yet another threshold of self and other, one that can be bridged through our mutual development of our own being through our engagement with worlds of imagination. As we liberate ourselves through books, as we dwell in written worlds, as we enter into relationships negotiated through books, we write our own life stories.

Sentience through Stories

What does it mean to become ourselves through books? What do we learn about the world and about ourselves as we create our sense of ourselves through reading? **What is the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction?** It is an engagement with our imagination and that of others that uncovers the hidden. It is a dwelling in community that moves us from being out-of-place into a place we have chosen. It is a web of relationships that nourish and enrich us. It is an expedition that transports us to multiple rich and supportive worlds and returns us to ourselves.

Pinkola Estes states, “The midway point between the worlds of reason and image, between feeling and thinking, between matter and spirit—between all the opposites and all shades of meaning one can imagine—is the home of the medial woman” (1995, p. 288). We envision ourselves as medial women, emplaced at those thresholds and negotiating the spaces of thinking and feeling, of reality and imagination, of self and other, and of knowledge and meaning. Bachelard says of our interior and outward being, “The two kinds of space, intimate space and exterior space, keep encouraging each other, as it were, in their growth” (1958/1994, p. 201). We grow through our experiences in these between-worlds, where we mediate our own being in the context of multiple lifeworlds and varying narratives.

We story ourselves into sentience. “Sentience” comes to us from the Latin *sentire*, to feel, to perceive, to know (Barnhart, 1988, p. 984), and also carries the ideas of understanding and meaning. All of these designations are important as we explore the experience of developing a sense of self through fiction. As we read, we feel emotional attachments as participants in the story, as companions of the characters, and as

inhabitants of the fictional lifeworld. Using all our senses, we perceive the worlds we enter and move across them into our own worlds with expanded understanding—of others and of ourselves. Throughout the process, we reflect upon our own being and seek to make meaning of what we have encountered. Through making meaning, we come to know ourselves. We emplace ourselves within our own lifeworlds, recognizing our own core of being, and creating the narrative that becomes a lifelong discourse and an ongoing journey, our own *currere*.

Malone observes, “We hope for all kinds of things from a book—pleasure, knowledge, insight, intimacy, greater understanding of others and ourselves, beauty” (2003, pp. 175-176). The women I conversed with and I have found all these elements and more in our lives as readers. As Michael Dirda notes, “We turn to books in the hope of better understanding our selves and better engaging with the meaning of our experiences” (2005, p. xv). For all of us who participated in this study, it has been an enduring quest to come to terms with our existence through the use of narrative, of metaphor, of imagination. We gaze at our own being in mirrors; we look outward to others and to wider worlds through windows; we stand at thresholds that mediate a multiplicity of dichotomies and choices.

In the group conversation, an interesting twist to the mirrors and windows metaphor I have been using is introduced when Ms. Wordsmith asks me, “How are you discussing or conceptualizing doors and windows?” When I respond that I had used mirrors and windows, she laughs. “Oh, I made up doors, didn’t I?” But I seize upon the idea of the door, and see it in a different way now that she has introduced it. Others encourage me to incorporate the image of the door into my concept, and to take

advantage of the symbolism it can offer. Mariah comments, “That’s the stepping through into action. I like that.” Anne extends the metaphor, “In the mirror, you look at yourself. In the window, you look out at the world, but you are separated from it; and the door, you walk through.” It seems to me that the image of walking through the door is a useful one to explore the educational implications of the across-ness, the liminal space, the threshold that we have identified in examining the lived experience of becoming through books.

Through fiction, we open doors, and walk through them to meet our own authentic being. With what we have uncovered in looking at the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction, what doors might we open for others? In Chapter 5, I look at where we might emerge when we open the doors through which our imagination beckons us and ways in which we might re-cognize ourselves and others when we move through them. What stories might we find when we take these steps?

**CHAPTER FIVE:
OPENING THE DOORS, MOVING ACROSS THE THRESHOLD**

*She looked into the mirror
What did she see?
A young girl curled upon a sofa,
Book-crouched, oblivious
She looked into the mirror
What did she see?
An adolescent in a bookstore,
Searching, stroking spines
She looked into a mirror
What did she see?
A mid-aged woman on a plane,
Yet elsewhere, book-wafted*

*She looked out of the window
What did she see?
Gentle men and passionate women,
Engaged in a strictured dance
She looked out of the window
What did she see?
Mothers torn from daughters,
Helpless, enraged
She looked out of the window
What did she see?
A dream of chosen family,
Supportive, tender, sweet*

*She moved to the threshold
Stood for a while, contemplated
She hovered in the doorway
The door open, inviting
She laughed, and ran out (McShane, 2010)*

As the conversations evolved and as I have sought the meanings to be uncovered within the themes that have emerged, I am struck by the metaphorical change that appears. We turn our gaze from mirrors through windows, moving toward the threshold, that liminal space where change is negotiated, preparing ourselves to move through the doorways we have identified into our lifeworlds, enriched by what we have learned.

What is the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction? For those

of us who have participated in this study, it involves re-cognition of ourselves through our understanding of others, dwelling within multiple worlds, and developing a sense of comfort at the spaces where they traverse one another. We readers often find ourselves in spaces of crossing, ready to step into one world or another, engaged in what van Manen describes as “the dialectic of inside and outside, of embodiment and disembodiment, of separation and reconciliation” (2003, p. 127). Our self-storying creates our authentic being, centering us so that we are able to move through the doors created by imagination into being-in-the-world.

Unlocking the Doors, Entering into Selfhood

Long ago, there were more doors to tombs than to homes, and the very image of *door* meant something of spiritual value was within, or that there was something within which must be kept contained. (Pinkola Estes, 1995, p. 48)

How much does the possibility of freedom depend on critical reflectiveness, on self-understanding, on insight into the world? (Greene, 1988, p. 79)

As it mirrors what we learn and know about ourselves and as it opens windows to what we can learn and come to understand about others, fiction both focuses and opens up what is taken for granted in our everyday perceptions. We find ourselves at various thresholds, liminal spaces where we stand at the brink of selfhood. Fiction provides us with ways through doors that open into realms of spiritual value, of lives that become examined ones, and of authentic selfhood through reflection. An author’s differing perspective leads us to consider more carefully both the unusual and the mundane, both exterior and interior experience. As we move across the landscape of fiction, we re-consider and re-visualize the landscape of our own lifeworlds. Reading fiction is not an empirical activity, but one that is experienced as lived, embodied by our physical being

and engaging our souls. As Jerome Bruner notes, "...the imaginative function is the means by which we create possible worlds and go beyond the immediately referential" (1986, p. 125). In these imaginative worlds of possibilities, we enter into real relationships with fictional beings, as well as with authors remote but present, and with others who share our passion for reading. As we read, we draw upon what we learn through fiction to visualize our own paths, the journeys upon which we can embark as we pass over the thresholds where we have been dwelling.

We envision the myriad possibilities that fiction has opened to us, empowered by the role models we've encountered and the insights we have received to act upon the imperative to step through our imaginative borders into our own lives and selfhood. We may have visions of the journey we are about to undertake, but fiction also teaches us that plots can change and surprise us. The conversations in this study resonate loudly with the importance of providing the opportunity for such re-consideration and re-visioning, without the imposition of a standardized expected outcome, granting us the freedom to pass through the doors that fiction has opened into lifeworlds of our own choosing. "For the door is an entire cosmos of the Half-open" (Bachelard, 1958/1994, p. 222). In the space of creating self through fiction, all the world is open to us, yet we continually bestraddle lived worlds, half-in, half-out, persistently in a state of negotiation. The precious entity protected by the door is both our personal identity, our idea and experience of our own being, and the cosmos we can experience in its multiplicity.

What happens as we unlock the doors that open to our own selfhood? All of us as readers sense something precious beyond the thresholds where we stand, something that contributes to our growth as beings in touch with our own souls, that element of spiritual

value that must be both enclosed and made accessible. While we seek whatever may need to be contained by doors, we also have a sense of releasing that containment, allowing the freedom to become ourselves as we reflect upon the insights we have gained and use them to develop our self-understanding. In this cycle of reflection and aperture, moving across thresholds and opening doors, we become the authentic selves, the self-aware selves described by Heidegger. By becoming ourselves through the books we read, we recognize the lives we have chosen, the selves we have become. Clarissa writes, “I have found that in finally having the opportunity to choose my life, I choose that which includes the space to be myself...” For all of us involved in this study, reading has been an important part of coming to the choices that shape our lives and shape our being-in-the-world. From understanding how books have been such a part of our becoming, how might we step through the door, crossing the threshold into action?

The Narratives of Selfhood

“Storying the self then becomes an ongoing process of self-building and self-negotiation; in this sense it is possible to see the self as an ongoing project of storying and narrative” (Goodson, 1998, p. 6). Participants in this study speak often of how self-storying is an ongoing and integral part of their lives, as well as a formative experience in their younger years. As Anthony Kerby points out, “Narrative, then, articulates what is of value to us and why, for it essentially defines (in the first instance) who we are and what we want—in cosmologies, eschatologies, histories, etc.” (1991, p. 59). The conversations and written pieces of this study make it very clear that reading fiction has been an important element in the ways that participants have seen themselves and have constructed the narratives of their own lives. Every participant describes how valuable

fiction has been in her own self-formation. As fictional worlds open up possibilities to us, we select those we find most appealing in constructing our ideas of ourselves. We move across lifeworlds to incorporate the qualities we find in fiction within our engagement with the everyday one, forming our own sense of being in that process.

Fiction makes such negotiation possible through its vivid quality. “Fiction, by definition unreal, is often experienced as more real than life itself” (van Manen, 1985, p. 181). Clarissa echoes this idea when she says, “There are book experiences that are more vivid to me than life experiences, and I have memories from books that are more vivid to me than many of my real memories.” About similar memories, Nancy Malone comments, “Books contain both our memories and our hopes, shape them, in some cases, create them” (2003, p. 175). Dennis J. Sumara confirms the permeability of our daily and fictional lifeworlds as he observes:

From my years of research into literary engagement it has become clear to me that the lines drawn between what are considered “truth” and “fiction” become largely obscured during processes of making and interpreting information, particularly when this information is represented as knowledge about one’s own identity. For example, I can not say with any accuracy which parts of my perceived sense of self have been developed by events that actually happened to me in my face-to-face encounters with humans and which have emerged from my identifications with fictional characters. (2002, pp. 58-59)

We look at interstices, boundaries, and permeability in considering the implications of how fiction constitutes a piece of our process of becoming. These conversations indicate how movement across is almost never-ending, and yet the books and our being find very stable dwelling places in one another. Our book experiences influence and shape us even as our daily experiences do. “For when the literary imagination is invoked through the historically-effected and situated interaction between reader and text, a world is brought

forth by a perception that has been altered” (Sumara, 1996, p. 152). All these experiences come together to create that authentic being, that examined entity that I call “myself.” As

Anthony Lane comments:

To say how, or why, we have been affected by certain books is not enough. We might as well talk of being affected by friends. The truth is perhaps more drastic: were it not for this friendship, or the pressure of that book, we would not be the people we are. Our lives as readers are nicked and nudged and, if we’re in luck, given the odd exhilarating shove into shapes that we never planned, or even desired. (1999, p. 143)

Every participant is actively engaged in an ongoing journey of self-discovery, self-definition and redefinition, and being-in-the-world. For all of us, fiction provides important guidebooks to that journey. Our process of engagement with the world around us has not stopped as we have achieved or continue to pursue academic degrees, but persists whether we have reached our second decade of life or our sixth. Sumara notes:

Our sense of personal identity is not something that develops through a process of accretion where new experiences are simply piled up on top of old ones. Instead, identity is constantly in the process of being written through the narrative interpretations we give to our remembered past, our lived present, and our projected future. (1996, p. 213)

Mariah offers a perceptive observation, “Art is going into a private place and having the deepest conversation with yourself that you can have.” We begin that conversation with ourselves, regarding the mirrors fiction holds up to us, and we enter into conversation with others, looking through the windows fiction offers. We use the imagination ignited by reading to take the deep conversation that we begin as a private, internal process, and begin to reach out to the world around us. We seek knowledge in multiple ways, with reading being foremost among them, and we use what we learn about the world and about ourselves to create the narrative interpretations that become our own stories.

Border-Crossing Both Ways

If we think of the experience of self-creation through reading as a liminal, threshold space, we must remember that we can both exit and enter the dwelling of selfhood that we construct. The multiplicity of lived worlds available to us through fiction can beckon, and we are also able to return to the domicile we have built through our engagement with those worlds, a place that becomes home to our authentic selves. Bachelard declares that “On whatever theoretical horizon we examine it, the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being” (1958/1994, p. xxxvi). I would add that the house, while a useful and evocative image, must be invested with our being to become a home as well.

The edifice that holds the mirrors of self-recognition and self-examination, the windows that allow us to see and perceive others, the thresholds and doors that place us in border space and move us outward—that structure becomes the home of our being, the habitation of that core we must never lose (as Anne asserts in Chapter 4) when we endow it with the narrative of our lived experience. All the while, we recognize that the home constructed from our engagement with fiction is a product of both the imagery and narrative possibilities we have received from others and our own unique interaction with them. As Gadamer says, “On the other hand, if a poet describes a house in his own words or evokes the idea of a house, we do not look in the direction of any particular house, but each of us constructs his own image of a house in such a way that it stands there for him as “the house” (1977/1986, p. 112). Even in building our self-homes, we move across thresholds, inviting the ideas offered by authors to be adopted as part of our household. Engagement with fiction facilitates the reflection and re-cognition that connects us to

others, that allows us to understand the world around us, that brings us to our own full potential of being.

“Home” comes to us from the Old English *hām*, meaning dwelling, house, estate or village; cognates in multiple languages encompass notions of residence, servants or slaves, household, estate, and my particular favorite, the Old Irish *cōim*, *cōem*, meaning dear or beloved (Barnhart, 1988, p. 487). “Home” comprises concepts of dwelling, the place where we are born and reared, the seat where we are developed, the abode where we are comfortable and restful. Home is dear to us, the space where we can love and be loved. “This is the environment in which the protective beings live” (Bachelard, 1958/1994, p. 7). Home is our refuge, our sanctuary, yet another sacred space. As readers, we move between adventuring in imaginative lifeworlds and returning to the home we have built to shelter our selves with the building materials we have gathered on such journeys.

As I glance through Chapter 4 and the conversations therein, I am struck by how often “home” is uttered. I have come to recognize that we are always seeking home, that place where we can define ourselves and be ourselves, and that we find the homes that shelter our selfhood by moving back and forth through the medial space of literature. When we are thrown into a world, or a family that feels hostile, we can discover others who are more hospitable. If we are surrounded by people who cause us pain, we can find companions who give us comfort and strength. If we are attracted to multiple personae, we have a chance to try several on and decide which might best suit us. We readers spend an exceptional amount of time in the space that Gloria Anzaldúa describes:

I now call it *Nepantla*, which is a Nahuatl word for the space between two bodies of water, the space between two worlds. It is a limited space, a

space where you are not this or that but where you are changing. You haven't got into the new identity yet and haven't left the old identity behind either—you are in a kind of transition. (2007, p. 237)

Endless possibilities surround our home-dwelling, and we move back and forth, crossing and re-crossing those thresholds, opening our doors to new experiences and closing them to claim the time, space, and safety to incorporate them into our own being. We explore and return, regroup and venture forth, all the while constructing the home of our souls.

Engagement with Lived Experience: The Interplay of Hermeneutics

In conducting this study, I began to understand why a phenomenological approach to the exploration of creating a sense of self through reading would hold such attraction. We readers are word-creatures, and the world of words is our natural dwelling-place. How could I not be drawn to a discipline in which the interpretation of language plays such an important part? As readers of fiction, we connect words to experience; indeed, words become our experience. The challenge of opening up the essence of an experience through words in conversation, written words, and the words I choose to describe it becomes a bewitching proposition. How do I best illuminate the experience we have shared as readers in the process of becoming ourselves? We move from the printed page that gives us our fictional experiences, over the threshold of our incorporation of that experience into our own lives, through the doorway that opens our experience to others, found once again on a printed page.

We readers become adept at hermeneutics as we use the fiction we read in storying our own lives. We claim multiple narratives, given to us through the generosity of authors, to weave into our own personal narratives. We learn to interpret, to identify the themes that are most resonant and useful for us, and to connect deeply with words to

make meaning of what transpires. We create our self-stories through metaphor, using the images that speak to us most deeply. Van Manen's words speak of how phenomenology can resonate for those of us who approach our self-creation through fiction:

And phenomenology differs from other disciplines in that it does not aim to explicate meanings specific to particular cultures (ethnography), to certain social groups (sociology), to historical periods (history), to mental types (psychology), or to an individual's personal life history (biography). Rather, phenomenology attempts to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, our lifeworld. (2003, p. 11)

Just as novels make the lived experience of characters real to readers, I seek to make the experiences of study participants as compelling and significant as I know they are. How do I choose the words that best express what our reading has meant to us? My time in fictional lifeworlds helps me to recognize the image that strikes the reader's vision, the cadence that pleases the ear, the description that places the reader within the setting. I seek to replicate Bruner's description of how we create: "The artist creates possible worlds through the metaphoric transformation of the ordinary and the conventionally 'given'" (1986, p. 49). Because I have stood at the threshold of reading, I can step out to write.

As readers, we construct enriched selves, selves that can contain the multitudes of lived beings that we have encountered. We bring those beings to life within ourselves, and yet retain our own inner core of being in the way we incorporate, embody, and transform what we learn from such encounters. Through this study, I have come to envision the selves of readers as a palimpsest of layered lives, revealing shadows of selves we have borrowed, appropriated, and, ultimately made our own. "The human subject, as the existentialists have long maintained, is an unfinished subject. But perhaps more than this it is a subject that continually writes, develops, and often erases its own

definition, its story” (Kerby, 1991, p. 52). Layer upon layer, adding and subtracting, writing and erasing, we build the being that we are always in the process of becoming, creating an image both bold and blurred, where who we have been peeks through who we have grown to be.

Those of us who are readers have boundless access to ways of being-in-the-world—unconstrained by time, place, gender, or culture. We have come to understand deeply experiences of being in ways that may not be available in our everyday paths, and have taken those experiences into our own unique souls, where they impart depth and complexity. “We know the world in different ways, from different stances, and each of the ways in which we know it produces different structures or representations, or, indeed, ‘realities’” (Bruner, 1986, p. 109). We read our own lives through the layers of lived worlds we have visited, confirming the paths we choose for ourselves and acknowledging the rich vein of imaginative power we have claimed for our own self-construction. How might we support the self-construction of others, especially students, through our understanding of the lived experience of creating self through fiction?

Educational Thresholds: Opening Doors for Students

In concentrating on the priority of the *experience* of reading (rather than bypassing the reading experience for the sake of the critical response) value is placed on the pedagogic nature of the experiences in the act of reading. So what fictional literature reveals to us is a knowing that is more like a living. (van Manen, 1985, p. 178)

We are selves always in process, lifeworks always in progress, and beings always capable of the self-reflection that leads to our inner growth. How might we encourage knowing that is more like living? How might our pedagogical orientation take advantage of the power of narrative to transport and transform? A description by Nel Noddings best

exemplifies my vision of what education could represent: “Classrooms should be places in which students can legitimately act on a rich variety of purposes, in which wonder and curiosity are alive, in which students and teachers live together and grow” (2005, p. 12). I would like to see classrooms in which teachers invite students into the homes that reading fiction can offer.

Noddings goes on to say, “We need a scheme that speaks to the existential heart of life—one that draws attention to our passions, attitudes, connections, concerns, and experienced responsibilities” (2005, p. 47). Fiction most assuredly draws our attention to these elements, in vivid and compelling ways. We experience passion and its consequences, begin to understand the attitudes and concerns of others, connect to them, and emerge with a sense of responsibility as we come to understand how many ways there are of living in the world.

The word “education” derives from the Latin *ēducātus*, past participle of *ēducāre*, to bring up, rear, related to *ēdūcere*, to bring out (Barnhart, 1988, p. 315). My old high-school Latin text reminds me that the root of that word, *dūcere*, carries meanings of to lead, to guide, to draw, to direct (Jenney & Scudder, 1965, p. 463). I find the concept of leading to be the most useful one when I contemplate what actions we might take as we walk through the door. As we look to lead others through education, we must remember the ways in which we’ve been sensitized by the multiplicity of lifeworlds that we have discovered through fiction. We must have the courage to raise our own voices and to invite others to be heard. As educators, we must also be communicators and creators. “Imagination is the refiner’s fire; the sensibility of each new generation is the lens” (Schwartz, 1996, p. 79). How can we, as educators, focus the lens of new generations to

ignite their imagination? Louise Rosenblatt exhorts, “Both our classroom atmosphere and the selection of reading materials should therefore be guided by the primary concern for creating a live circuit between readers and books” (2005, p. 66). Such a live circuit can be a conduit for students’ self-perception.

The experience of participating in these conversations has led me to return to several ideas I began to explore in earlier chapters: *Currere* (Pinar, 1978, 1995, 2004), as the notion of an individual educational journey characterized by its unending quality and self-reflection; *Re-cognition*, as the changes in our thoughts and actions brought about through our reading; and *In-habiting*, with its implications of holding, having, and dwelling. If we seek not only to educate students in traditional classroom settings, but also to acknowledge the lifelong learning we engage in as readers, we can see a myriad of opportunities to support the selfhood of those we encounter by opening up the possibilities of connecting the in-habitation we experience at the threshold of multiple lifeworlds to the re-cognition of self and other we are led to, thereby culminating in the reflection upon our experience that sustains self-formation.

Currere as a Door to Selfhood

An education for freedom must move beyond function, beyond the subordination of persons to external ends...Encounters with the arts alone will not realize it; but the arts will help open the situations that require interpretation, will help disrupt the walls that obscure the spaces, the spheres of freedom to which educators might some day attend. (Greene, 1988, pp. 132-133)

And, indeed, we who are teachers know that imagination has this multiple power: to create orders, to provoke authentic vision, and to surprise. (Greene, 1990/2001i, p. 83)

A classroom pedagogy that could reflect what has been uncovered in this study would be one that, first of all, defines success in ways that are not strictly measurable in

terms of a student's circling a bubble designated as the "correct" response to a standardized test. Through the concept of *currere*, we can recast learning as a journey of the individual that takes us to lifeworlds that exist both in physical reality and in imagination. We share these lifeworlds with families, colleagues, strangers, acquaintances, as well as others whom we meet through fiction: characters, authors, other readers. Not only do we journey within these lifeworlds, we pass back and forth between their intersections. "Reading gives a context for experience, a myriad of contexts" (Schwartz, 2003, p. 118). We read, reflect, and return with new understanding.

Any great novel is rich...because the experiences we gain in the reading act are themselves infinitely rich and interpretable...Fiction solicits an experience of the world and then elicits a reflective interpretation of the textual experience. (van Manen, 1985, p. 186)

The reflective interpretation described by van Manen is a key element of the idea of *currere* as a self-reflective practice in educational settings. As Bruner asserts, "Self rises out of the capacity to reflect upon our own acts..." (1986, p. 67). Deborah writes of how important the models she found in books were to her own formation of the ways she perceives herself and the values she embraces in her life: "I learned there were many, many ways to live one's life. That you had to find your own path and follow it wherever it led you...And most importantly, that I was and would be fine as myself, as long as I listened to myself." For Deborah, fiction allows her to reflect upon her own experience in re-contextualized ways, giving her the confidence to listen to her own perceptions and to value her own conclusions, all the while recognizing that her way of being is not the only possible one. A pedagogy that engages with self-formation can instill such confidence without dictating a specific way of being and, indeed, confirming that multiple ways of being can be legitimate in negotiating our way through the world.

Katherine also writes eloquently about the importance reading and fiction have had in her own process of becoming: “These dreams and fantasies were the bricks on which I built my personality, my ‘self.’ Imagination was the strongest tool in my arsenal of becoming, because it gave me courage... and the scope to think well outside the boxes...” Katherine reiterates the theme of how fiction can move our self-perception beyond boundaries imposed by others. We move outside of the boxes in which we may be placed, using our imagination to create the worlds and universes in which we choose to place ourselves. Such a view of imagination sustains Maxine Greene’s call for its power to be exercised in education, as she speaks of “...the ability to pull aside the curtains of habit, automatism, banality, so that alternative possibilities can be perceived. And it is imagination that makes this kind of experience attainable...” (1993/2001f, pp. 178-179). When we pull aside the curtains of our routines and conventions, we can see through the windows fiction gives us to wider worlds, and use that insight to redefine our own places in those worlds. “People must become aware of the ways they construct their realities as they live together—how they grasp the appearances of things, how and when they interrogate their lived worlds, how they acknowledge the multiple perspectives that exist for making sense of the commonsense world (Greene, 1995, p. 65). When we engage in the reflection supported by fiction, we cultivate such awareness. Pinar et al. describe elements of the process of self-formation that come out of such reflection: “It is to oneself that one comes to practice the auto-biographics of self-shattering, revelation, confession, and reconfiguration. Self-excitation precedes the self-understanding, which precedes self-mobilization...” (2004, p. 55).

As we run the course of our lives, we open to the currents of ideas available to us. Some of us are sprinters, picking up ideas quickly and moving on to other thoughts and dreams in rapid succession. Some of us gravitate to marathons, concentrating on specific long-term goals and keeping a steady pace that allows us to maintain our efforts. All of us must be given the opportunity to discover the course that most suits us and to adopt a way of running that aligns with our authentic being. Opening up the realm of pedagogy to include multiple settings and multiple ways of being allows us to acknowledge that learning and formation of the individual are not limited to standardized responses or venues limited to those labeled as educational institutions. Greene asks, “How can we teach so as to provoke questioning of the taken-for-granted, the kind of questioning that involves simultaneously critical and creative thinking and attentive engagement with actualities?” (1995, p. 175). The worlds we enter through words can open doors to spaces wherein we can formulate such questions.

Re-Cognition through Language

What, then, of words? Words do not reach out and touch objects for their meaning, anchoring themselves like labels stuck to things. Words are linked in intricate webs of self-reference and in hermeneutic streams of endless repetition. Words begin and end in repetition, meaning something new with each utterance. This is the paradox of language: words mean everything they always have meant, and they mean something new. (Steeves, 2006, p. 2)

Language does not exist as a veil between subjects and objects but, rather, functions to connect and interpret the experiences that constitute one’s experience of identity. The capacity to use language to create links among things that are present to consciousness, as well as to things that are remembered or predicted, gives humans a unique ability to interpret the relations of past, present, and projected experience. (Sumara, 2002, pp. 85-86)

Through stories, connecting us with words, we move from one way of being to another, guided by rich fictional experiences. We move across ways of understanding ourselves as we incorporate such experiences, as we identify with the protagonists of novels or define ourselves in relationship to them. Language connects us to others, allowing us to imagine experiences beyond those in our immediate environment, providing a landing-place for any leap we take into projected possibilities. As Robert Alter asserts, “Literary language is an intricate, inventively designed vehicle for setting the mind in restless pleasing motion, which in the best of cases may give us a kind of experiential knowledge relative to our lives outside reading” (1996, p. 22). In coming to know the world through words, we come to know ourselves and to perceive ourselves in new ways. “For although every new experience is the end-point of all those which came before it, it is also a point of recursion in which all that was past is understood differently” (Sumara, 1996, p. 152). Pedagogy that takes into account the multiplicity of the spaces, times, experiences, and ways of learning available to us can engender the cognition and re-cognition that supports students in becoming themselves.

As readers, we consider constantly what Critchley calls “...the guiding question of epistemology: the relation between thought and things, or words and world” (2004, p. 193). We are caught in the intricate webs of self-reference, and immerse ourselves in the hermeneutic streams described by Steeves, persistently engaged in re-cognition through our relationship with words. Our exploration of epistemology is conducted through the texts that induce us to think about our world and our place within it. We come to know through word-wandering. A gifted writer can be articulate where we cannot, can speak up where we feel silenced. A book that speaks what we feel clearly, honestly, and truly is a

special gift that moves us into our meaning-making. We often speak of cognitive dissonance, but perhaps one of the true contributions of literature is the development of cognitive assonance, where the words of the writer resonate deeply with our own experience. As Malone notes, "... language, in all its dimensions, articulates the human spirit" (2003, p. 122). Through this interplay of language, we re-cognize ourselves in several ways, coming to know the human spirit we share.

Re-Cognition of ourselves as beings with value and agency. Greene articulates how using imagination can lead to a sense of agency within the world. "Again, it may be the recovery of imagination that lessens the social paralysis we see around us and restores the sense that something can be done in the name of what is decent and humane" (1995, p. 35). Ms. Wordsmith describes the call to action she felt when books sensitized her to disparities in power:

Well, to me, the message was, change the world. ... These are situations that these people have to act within, struggle within, but I don't want them to happen; I want to change the world, so that I can be acting and living in a different kind of world.

Ms. Wordsmith's sense of wanting to change the world and her perception that she possesses the agency to make such changes have led her to a lifelong involvement with peace and justice issues. A pedagogy sensitive to the ability of fiction to inspire action through its vivid presencing of issues can give students both a sense of their own agency and objectives for using it. "For language, although it is rooted in perception, nevertheless has a profound capacity to turn back upon, and influence, our sensorial experience" (Abram, 1996, pp. 90-91). Our re-cognition begins in the world of words and moves out into our physical lifeworld.

Fiction supports our agency within our personal lives as well. Mariah speaks of how a passage in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* engendered an epiphany that spurred her into action to transform her marriage: "I started sobbing; as I read the page, I just started sobbing, and it was my way of knowing it wasn't my imagination...and that was an interesting dynamic...a physical, spontaneous, lived experience that came out of a recognition." Such recognition of truths within our own lives, made visible to us through fictional mirrors, attest to the power of literature. Giving students the space for connecting literature to their own lives can underscore its relevance to them, and provide them with re-cognition of themselves and their lives that allows them to address issues that may need their attention. Such a classroom space reflects the concerned being-toward our students that constitutes a real contribution to their *carrere*. Several participants faced particularly difficult situations in their childhood, just as our students may be facing crises or abuse. Fiction can provide not only agency for dealing with such challenges, but a template for doing so.

Re-Cognition that reading can offer not just an escape, but a lifeline. While we all speak of reading as an escape, often from chaotic and frightening households, an exchange in our group conversation particularly illuminates how fiction can not only move us from a bad situation, but can help us to cope, and, indeed, inspire us to make such a move. Clarissa responds to another participant's description of how fiction has taught her how to stay alive: "For me, it was very much *why* to stay alive...I was reading just to say—okay, why? And a lot of the young adult stuff, with the strong women and the dragon slayer, the magic—thinking, well, there's not really magic in this life, but if I can get out of this into my own life, I've made it."

While Clarissa distinguishes a fantastical world from the one she inhabits, she is still able to extrapolate that the life she desires is possible, and that staying alive to experience it can be worthwhile. Fiction provides her with the motivation to turn away from self-destruction and to continue to live and grow. When I was teaching, every year included the experience of a student confiding in me about having suicidal thoughts. At that point in time, I focused on getting those students into counseling as soon as possible. While that strategy would certainly still be part of my approach to helping them, I would now be more aware that reading could be an important part of their healing as well.

Clarissa elaborates on the ways that books can provide revival as well as refuge:

And books do that; they create possibilities... You're still yourself, but with me, the good books make me more myself than I ever was. Like they give me a new layer that was the layer I needed... some small transformation, some new idea, some hope, or some possibility, or just some appreciation of beauty.

Books provide us with hope as well as solace. They can also fortify us against attacks upon our selfhood. While she has come to terms with her family, Clarissa still uses fiction to smooth the friction of visits where members of her extended family assail the choices she has made in her life. "And so I have to bolster myself with books. And I do." How might we use fiction to open up possibilities for our students that assist them in coping when life is assaultive?

So often, a focus in current literature curricular standards is the examination of conflict—humans versus nature, persons versus society, characters in conflict with each other. Perhaps we could reconfigure some of our curriculum to value harmony as well, opening up spaces for students to find a welcoming environment rather than a harsh one. These conversations remind us, however, that not all opposition is destructive. Mariah

writes about her encounters with self-destructive heroines such as Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, and how her revulsion with their self-involvement led her to a different path: “This was amazing literature! This was holding up a mirror to my life. These were characters that I read carefully, that I needed to understand. I wanted to know them, and to identify with them, by negation, so that I would never be what they became.” These characters resemble Mariah’s self-destructive mother, whose suicide attempts haunt her adolescence. In reading about them, she seeks to understand their impulses, but rejects such a path for herself. While we may understand characters deeply, we can also recognize that our choices can be different. We can find the full scope of humanity, good and bad, in literature, and engage critically with what we find to determine our own destinies. Part of that critical engagement is coming to an understanding of those who are different from us. “It is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself” (Levinas, 1961/2003, p. 179).

Re-cognition not only of ourselves, but also of the Other. The opening of windows onto differing worlds is another important aspect of fiction. As Mary Aswell Doll notes, “...strong fiction does not merely replicate another world; it brings readers into alien encounters” (2000, p. 93). All of us engaged in these conversations remark upon what we have learned about cultures and ways of being that are not our own, and how reading has made us more aware of the multiplicity of ways of being-in-the-world.

Katherine writes of the ways that fiction can introduce us to others:

Each character, crafted at the hands of a skillful writer, experiences life vividly and projects their emotions so strongly through the pages that a reader cannot help but feel the experience with them. When we complete these books, we’ve added to our capacity to both emote and empathize.

This empathy allows us to participate imaginatively in lifeworlds we may never enter except through fiction. Such participation, in turn, engenders re-cognition of people whose lives might not intersect our own in space and time. Atwell-Vasey speaks of “...the value of transitional experiences which help a reader bridge the familiar with the strange or threatening, and the self and the other” (1998, p. 163).

In the group conversation, Anne speaks of how reading has affected her perception of others who face oppression: “I don’t think I was ever called to action by any book. But I noticed that the books really sensitized me to different people... I don’t remember it called me to action in a big way, but it called me to action in small ways.” Anne re-cognizes herself as someone with gaps in her knowledge because she does not directly experience certain types of oppression, but is also moved to at least small actions because of what she has experienced vicariously. Ms. Wordsmith responds and expands upon Anne’s comment: “Being sensitized to people who are not you, or not in your situation, through a book is no small thing... it’s no small thing to have a book put you in somebody else’s skin—to the extent that you can go through that.”

Clarissa continues the thread by observing that “Even sometimes when we see the characters responding very positively, and how we wish we would, wondering would I have the courage to, if that were me.” As a group, we mull over how the different ways in which we are privileged (or not privileged) in our society have influenced our perceptions. For all of us, fiction, in opening windows of expanded experience, requires us to come to terms with our emplacement in our daily lifeworlds and our relationships to wider worlds outside them. Fiction can open such windows for teachers as well, promoting a pedagogical orientation that becomes more and more inclusive as we come

to understand students unlike us more and more. Literature can hone our ability to empathize, and we can bring that heightened awareness into the classroom. In the same way, reading can be a conduit for harmonizing the diversity of cultures and outlooks we may find in our classrooms. “There are few limits to what is available in literature to acquaint us, intimately, with one another, to enlarge our understanding and sympathies, all the while giving us keen pleasure” (Malone, 2003, pp. 170-171).

To return to the concept of agency, we observe how fiction can move us into action on behalf of others as well as ourselves. In an earlier chapter, I mention my own practice of shopping weekly for a food pantry, inspired by a novel. Art of many kinds can spur our actions. Clarissa speaks of coming to finalizing her decision to join the Peace Corps at a U2 concert, upon hearing their song, “One.” The message she perceives is, “We may not get along, but we’ve got to try this thing and do our best and live our best possible life... I thought, okay, I’m going—forget it, I’m done, I’m going.” The power of language and metaphor moves her from a state of indecision— “I knew I was putting off all sorts of things in my life. I was temping...living in a monthly rental apartment...I needed to do it and I couldn’t commit to anything else until I had done it”—into the clarity that allows her to resist family expectations and engage with the wider world to benefit others.

In the group session, Ms. Wordsmith says of Irène Némirovsky’s *Suite Française*, “I don’t know how this exactly changed me, but I’m just saying that it’s no small thing to have a book put you in somebody else’s skin.” When we live in that skin, our empathy can persuade us to examine our own actions. In continuing the dialogue about how being sensitized in this way affects us, Anne asserts, “I would always get a chance to construct

my own response I would have risen up against that. I would have hidden Eli Wiesel's sister—so I get to create a way I would like to be, a way I think I might be...I would not treat another human being like that." Later, Ms. Wordsmith comments on a book about Jewish professors who, upon fleeing Nazi Germany, choose to teach at Historically Black Universities:

But one of the things I took away from it was how do you go from a situation where, in Nazi Germany, you can't be this, you can't do this, and then, ultimately, you can't be...And I kept thinking, how, psychologically, could you just go on and transform yourself? And, of course, it was this purpose, this service... I just found that wonderful.

For Ms. Wordsmith, service is something that makes our lives count. Even when we have constructed our own selfhood in overcoming difficult circumstances, we have a responsibility to support the selfhood of others who are struggling. How might such a view of our common humanity be promoted through our education?

Literature communicates the human spirit, in all its variety, to us. Through (even vicarious) understanding of the Other, we can be moved to oppose oppression and to work toward a more common good. We can be opened to acceptance and called to action. "I think that fictions like these revealed to me my stake in the human condition, helping me reach the ground of my being—which is also the ground of learning, of reaching beyond where one is" (Greene, 1995, p. 93). Educators can open lifeworlds to students by taking advantage of the deep ways we inhabit and dwell in books.

In-habiting: Dwelling in the Home of Learning

Art is only "possible" because the formative activity of nature leaves an open domain which can be filled with the productions of the human spirit. (Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 13)

The greatness of a work of art, we may maintain, lies in its intensity or breadth of vision, its inner integrity, its power to give us a sense of

dominating for the time being the fragmentary, inchoate, multiple diversity of human life. (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 110)

Reading is one of the formative activities wherein we engage with productions of the human spirit and use the open domain described by Gadamer to become ourselves through books. We move from the fragmentation Rosenblatt cites into cohesion within ourselves. For all participants, our connection with literature is a deeply held embodiment of our being. Katherine writes about her own perception of selfhood and how she sees her own development:

To some, the self may be personal identity, an intersection of characteristics and defining features. Others may see the self as a concrete thing, personality defined at birth and released as an individual gains the knowledge and experience needed for expression...I conceptualize “self” as something fluid, constantly changing, growing and evolving. One of the largest influences on my self-development process has been books.

Katherine touches upon the paradoxical nature of self-definition as both ephemeral and concrete, yet another liminal space. Perhaps most importantly, she acknowledges that it is a continually evolving process. Another paradox of learning through literature is that we simultaneously learn about the world and about ourselves. “For to read is to enter into a profound participation, or chiasm, with the inked marks upon the page” (Abram, 1996, p. 131).

The intertwined nature of such ways of knowing is an element commented upon often in our conversations. Mariah speaks about the way a book can draw her more deeply into herself. “Reading that book, I might become a little bit more who I am, or who I want to be, which, hopefully is the same thing.” Katherine echoes this idea as she writes, “We internalize the stories [that] grow from their own imaginations, and use these stories to expand our imaginations in turn. This ability to dream, to escape to another

world in our thoughts, is what helps us build ourselves as people.” This movement across the planes of imagination and its internalization is constant, and yet participants seem to experience a kind of balance in coming to a state of being where they feel that the books in-habit them as much as they in-habit the books. “The two kinds of space, intimate space and exterior space, keep encouraging each other, as it were, in their growth” (Bachelard, 1958/1994, p. 201). As educators, we can take advantage of the duality of our experience of in-habitation to enter into a conversation that negotiates between the public space of the classroom and the private space of our students’ being.

What are the habits that we want to model and encourage in our students? Noddings proposes that “All students should be engaged in a general education that guides them in caring for self, intimate others, global others, plants, animals, and the environment, the human-made world, and ideas” (2005, p. 173). We may wish to encourage our students to develop the habit of concerned being-toward all these aspects of our lived worlds. Certainly, the experience of dwelling in fictional spaces seems to be a powerful means of developing such in-habitation. We have the opportunity to make use of the way that literature enables us to perceive ourselves as both established and in flux in order to encourage the self-reflection important to *currere*.

Clarissa characterizes learning from reading as something we internalize. “I think you carry it with you. It’s sort of like the places you’ve been and the people you’ve known. They all change you.” In our group conversation, she and Mariah have an exchange about the duality of our relationships with books. For Clarissa, “They’re almost like—when I sleep in hotels or something, I feel like by sleeping in a room, I’ve left a little bit of me in it. And I think with books, it becomes...you leave a little piece of your

soul in it.” Conversely, Mariah observes that books leave a little piece of them in us. “And so then it goes the other way—we become part of the [book].” While we internalize what the book gives us, we seem also to offer something of ourselves in return. I know that in my teaching days, it was often difficult to persuade students to engage deeply with novels. Perhaps we can incorporate some acknowledgment that we must allow that permeability and self-giving in order to find a dwelling place in the book, as well as the encouragement that doing so will reward us in how the book then becomes part of us.

Our in-habitation of and by fiction forges lifelong relationships for us as well. Though the group of participants ranges in age from their 20s through their 60s, all of us speak of carrying life lessons, habits, understanding, and values from books we read in childhood and adolescence. In-corporating what we read, we take what books give us not only into our lived bodies, but into our souls. Ms. Wordsmith writes:

As a mature woman, I can see that many aspects of Jane Eyre’s character have influenced my life...She has the courage to define herself, to exert her agency in a society that would belittle or dismiss her...Her desire to enlarge her scope, to travel and meet and know a wide range of people I have been able to realize in my own career...I am grateful and lucky to have been sustained for so many years by this vision of a full, realized life—a vision given to me by Jane Eyre.

We emulate our heroines and we follow the paths that they forge for us. We see the world through their eyes and our own sight is enhanced. We envision ourselves with the qualities they model, and carry that vision into our career paths and our relationships. I know that Sara Crewe still provides me with inspiration in my desire to engage with storytelling, as evidenced by the subject of this study. In addition, I still value the dignity with which she always carries herself, and seek to maintain my poise throughout difficult

situations. Sara's respect for and delight in her own imagination allow me to enjoy my own fanciful streak. Through many decades, Sara has been a role model and a friend.

Those strong females we latch on to early in life can continue to motivate our emulation. In our group conversation, several of us joke that one of those "WWJD" bracelets would, for us, have the implication of "What would Jane do?" rather than the Christian shorthand usually imputed to them. For us, Jane Eyre is as legitimate a role model and one who can inspire us just as well as a religious leader. Who are the heroes and heroines who can inspire our students? How might we open the world to them through the eyes of the characters who can be lifelong companions? Books not only bring us into relationship with worlds full of characters, opening that window onto understanding of the Other, but draw us into worlds created through words. These words, in turn, allow us to find our own voices. A pedagogy that recognizes the powerful pull across to fictional worlds can take advantage of the way in which dwelling there can help us to name our own experiences. In such naming, we find our own voices, even if they have often been silenced in our past.

Van Manen reminds us that, "Reading is the making of meaning as well as a form of communication via the text" (1985, p. 185). Within that meaning-making, we often find that narrative can name what we may not be able to name, can say what we may not be able to say just yet. In the group conversation, Clarissa describes a recent visit to her childhood home and extended family. Looking for the right book to process that experience, she chooses *Brideshead Revisited* because she sees her family as "sort of the blue-collar Marchmains." She continues, "And so I needed to hang out with Sebastian that week. Because even in all of his dysfunctions, he could articulate a lot of what I was

feeling at that time.” Later, she speaks of experiencing an old text in a new way: “I know the first time I reread Hamlet after my father died... I’m thinking, wow, this is exactly what I’m feeling, but there was no way for me to articulate this... What did Shakespeare live that he could actually name this so clearly and honestly and truly?” Language created by an author once again brings us to understanding—of ourselves, our own emotions, our own experiences. We enter into communication through the meaning we make of such an articulation and can begin to name our own worlds. Greene recognizes such naming as an entry into such shared culture as she observes, “Young persons have the capacity to construct multiple realities once they have begun to name their worlds. And that naming is a function of a growing acquaintance with conceptual networks and symbol systems characteristic of the culture’s way of making sense” (1995, p. 57).

The fiction that gives voice to us need not be that which is designated as great literature, although many of us find much to draw from in classics and contemporary writing. At another end of the spectrum, Katherine describes how a comic book heroine has helped her to speak up in her workplace, a male-dominated environment. For her, the relationship begins in childhood. “Maybe it wasn’t always the most interesting of literature, but it still spoke very strongly to me growing up.” Katherine acknowledges that she has strong women as role models in her family, particularly a grandmother who reared five children after being widowed soon after her youngest was born, but she comments, “So I wasn’t lacking for strong women in my life, but this one had that air of the fantastic to it and it was so different that it just drew me in... When talking about strong women, that’s the first thing that comes to mind, and probably always will be.”

For Katherine, the extraordinary qualities of the heroine and the imaginative lifeworld of the comic book attract her, and yet she finds an application for what she sees in her everyday work world as he considers the example of a superhero council that includes females: “You see that they’re not afraid to voice an opinion in these situations, and you can take something from that ... You learn to pipe up because even if you have an opinion that you think may be incorrect, you won’t learn otherwise, unless you say something.” The model of a fictional council that accepts the opinions and participation of women transfers into Katherine’s professional life, giving her permission to use her own voice and to seek additional knowledge. She is no longer silenced by fear. Perhaps if we open up curriculum to non-traditional sources—graphic novels, Internet fiction sites, etc.—we may find images and role models that are useful for students who are not moved by more traditional literature. The lifeworlds of fiction, wherever we find them, have the capacity to expand our own lifeworlds and to support us in finding the voices that express our selves in situations where we might otherwise go unheard. For participants in this study, that expression has taken on several forms, and springs from the deep sense of self that we have created through our reading. We carry that sense of self into the world, and engage with the world from the foundation that it gives us. Our lived experience in the private space of reading influences our being in the public world. When we consider the interplay of public and private in the educational space, where teachers and students create selves together, how might our reading inform our lives there?

Conversations across the Threshold: Readers as Self-Creators

Each of us...reads a book against the template of his own personality, experience, tastes, and dispositions of the moment, so that in a very real way each reader is the cocreator of the work being read; it is not a one-sided affair. (Malone, 2003, p. 127)

Reading is a privileged pleasure because each of us enjoys it, quite complexly, in ways not replicable by anyone else. But there is enough structured common ground in the text itself so that we can talk to each other, even sometimes persuade each other about what we read; and that many-voiced conversation, with which, thankfully, we shall never have done, is one of the most gratifying responses to literary creation, second only to reading itself. (Alter, 1996, p. 238)

An element of our reading that becomes very clear through the conversations we have conducted is our deep connection with the text and our commitment to connecting our own being with what we find there. As readers, we turn to the art of literature to conduct deep conversation not only with ourselves, but also with the author, the characters, other readers, and with the language of the text itself. We enter a dyadic relationship with the text in order to distinguish what it will mean to us. When we read, we are not merely absorbing something created, but participating in its creation as we align the book's lived world with our own. The self that is a reader also becomes the co-creator Malone identifies, engaging in the many-voiced conversation described by Alter. As educators, how might we invite students into such a conversation? How might we support their becoming the co-creators of their own worlds?

Taking advantage of the ways in which fiction supports our becoming is one path to creating an educational environment that allows students to engage in self-storying and re-cognition of themselves as beings capable of negotiating their lived worlds. A curriculum designed to balance arts and humanities more equally with more technically

oriented subjects and instruction would be a step in the right direction. Greene's appraisal of the skewed orientation of schools is still resonant today: "They are, after all, largely hierarchical, bureaucratic institutions with their own internal demands for self-perpetuation and equilibrium. By their very nature, they make it extraordinarily difficult for openings to be explored and critical thinking to take place" (1995, p. 56). Using novels to spark the conversations that engage with many different voices can mitigate the bureaucratic nature of the school and create openings for exploration. Greene goes on to say, "How can we create classroom situations in which significant dialogue might be encouraged once again, the live communication out of which there might emerge some consciousness of interdependence as well as a recognition of diverse points of view?" (p. 177). If we are less focused upon stuffing students with factoids required by standardized tests, if we can enter into dialogue through the door of reading, what might students learn about themselves and others?

A classroom with space for conversation and self-exploration, where imagination is valued and made visible through arts and humanities, is one that can address the dilemma posed by Noddings: "For adolescents, these are among the most pressing questions: Who am I? What kind of person will I be? Who will love me? How do others see me? Yet schools spend more time on the quadratic formula than on any of these existential questions" (2005, p. 20). By recognizing our need to muse and ponder, and deemphasizing the requirement to master specific technical elements, schools can support students in trans-forming themselves across their private and public worlds.

Negotiating between Public and Private Spaces

Fiction opens possibilities for transformation, even as it situates us within the elements of selfhood that compose our core of being. At the threshold of stasis and change, we read to discover where we wish to stand. In the classroom, literary engagement as an opportunity for conversation that negotiates between the publicly shared experience of the book and the privately developed response could uncover multiple possibilities for students. Arthur Applebee describes the opening that an approach to curriculum as conversation could provide: “When we take this metaphor seriously, the development of curriculum becomes the development of culturally significant domains for conversation, and instruction becomes a matter of helping students learn to participate in conversations within those domains” (1996, p. 3).

An educational setting where the divergence between public and private discourse is acknowledged, and the ability of reading to negotiate between those spaces is utilized, could bridge many thresholds for our students. Such an environment could forge connections where heretofore there have been divisions. “In classroom life, we have drawn boundaries around subjectivity and called it private and drawn boundaries around objectivity and called it public” (Atwell-Vasey, 1998, pp. 34-35). Rich portrays such separation even more severely: “We are urged to separate the ‘personal’ (our entire existence as women) from the ‘scholarly’ or ‘professional’” (1979, p. 207). The fiction we read links our outer and inner lifeworlds, connecting our personal selves to the society around us. The lives we live deeply in fiction allow us to move within the greater world as we strengthen our own core being. Personal and professional, private and public need no more be in conflict, but reconciled through our reading when we can draw students

into conversation that allows them to recognize and question the domains in which they operate. As Rosenblatt observes:

Embodying funded assumptions, attitudes, and expectations about language and about the world, this inner capital is all that each of us has to draw on in speaking, listening, writing, or reading. We “make sense” of a new situation or transaction and make new meanings by applying, reorganizing, revising, or extending public and private elements selected from our personal linguistic-experiential reservoirs. (2005, p. 5)

To unfetter students’ abilities to make meaning, we must take into account their personal relationships to literature, understood within the context of their lived worlds.

While their immediate environments may have limitations, we have heard many times in these conversations how reading can overcome the confines of restricted worlds to open new ones in ways that are vividly presented. According to Iser, “Apprehension of a literary work comes about through the interaction between the reader’s presence in the text and his habitual experiences, which are now a past orientation” (1978, p. 133).

Another threshold is crossed, from past to a new present, from an old way of understanding to a new one, through the conversation that we conduct with text. Teachers become the guides to fluency in such interaction, assisting their charges in finding their own voices to express, to question, and to develop their own inner resources.

In preparing to provide such guidance, it is helpful to recognize that “Reading is not a direct ‘internalization’, because it is not a one-way process, and our concern is to find means of describing the reading process as a dynamic *interaction* between text and reader” (Iser, 1978, p. 107). We may function as facilitators for such interactions when we must acknowledge their dynamic nature and resist the impulse to direct them. When we allow our students to be themselves in their engagement with literature, we grant them the freedom to make meaning for themselves and to create their own selfhood. “In

literary works, however, the message is transmitted in two ways, in that the reader ‘receives’ it by composing it” (Iser, p. 21). We engage in border-crossing yet again, inviting students across to the autonomy of being at once reader and creator.

Readers as Co-Creators of Meaning

“But soon we begin to ask what else those marks on the page can give us. We begin to want information, entertainment, invention, even truth and beauty” (Prose, 2006, p. 5). Throughout these conversations, we have acknowledged that the markings on a page are not merely hieroglyphics that convey a message, but symbols that can create a world. While we enter the world through words, the conversation in which we engage requires that we invest our own selfhood in deriving meaning from what we read. When we approach the teaching of reading as a technical endeavor, we lose the perspective of what the words we have decoded can mean to us. A pedagogical approach that allows for reading to be taught with an orientation to being in the moment and the lifeworld of the text can engage students more actively, developing analytical skills to look more deeply into its significance. Rosenblatt asserts, “A poem is not a ready-made object to which a reader is passively exposed. A poem is a happening, an event, in which the listener or the reader draws on images and feelings and ideas stirred up by the words of the text; out of these is shaped the lived-through experience” (2005, p. 96). As we become facilitators of such experiences, we can draw students into their own identity as meaning makers.

Rosenblatt continues:

When we envisage our task as helping the student to understand and to evaluate his own responses to books, to become aware of and critical of his own sense of what is important and unimportant in life and literature, we shall make of literature a medium of enjoyment and insight rather than an object of academic study. (2005, p. 110)

Turning from a technical orientation to one of engagement enables us to enliven the relationship of students to what they read, creating an engagement in which they are active participants in exploration, rather than passive recipients of technical skills.

An often forgotten aspect of education, lost in all the standardized testing and vocational training, is the search for truths—truths that can be conveyed to us through narrative, truths that can place our personal verities within the context of community. “Art lets truth originate” (Heidegger, 1971/2001b, p. 75). Pinar et al. remind us that “Conversation occurs both intersubjectively *and* intrasubjectively, in rooms of our own. There we turn away from the maelstrom of everyday life, and in solitude and silence we can hear ourselves, including the otherness, the alterity within” (2004, p. 251). As educators, we can invite students into such deep conversation, both internal and external, by creating spaces where they can have the privacy for internal engagement, as well as spaces where they are safe to share their discoveries with others. While the classroom conversation may be lively, it must also leave space for silence to support the contemplation that allows the integration of other and self. The classroom must include the mirrors in which we can see ourselves, the windows through which we can see others, and the doors that we can open to speak to one another.

“Reading is a very creative act; until the book is read, it’s really not completed. Lines on a page are like a circuit that the reader’s life flows through” (E.L. Doctorow, as cited in Thompson, 2006, p. C01). When we come to understand how we invest our own lives into the world provided by the author, we can we ignite the imaginative spark within our students to approach their own lives and being creatively. Pinar et al. remind us that “Curriculum remains pre-eminently that conversation, but it is also a conversation among

the participants, one which supports and explores the possibilities of unpredicted and novel events, unplanned destinations...” (2004, p. 224). When we become participants in the conversation shared by our students, the authors of the works they read, the characters they meet therein, and their reading companions, we create possibilities for the unexpected, and allow the journey to take us to destinations we discover together. Such a pedagogical approach supports self-formation through recognizing the agency of students in creating their own lifeworlds. The literary conversation becomes one in which we find an imaginative common ground and can approach each other in a caring way.

Transformation: Learning across Lifeworlds

Our discussions of standards and curriculum frameworks and outcomes still have not touched seriously upon the matter of our purposes as a society: upon what it means to educate live persons, to empower the young not simply to make a living and contribute to the nation’s economic welfare but to live and, along with others, to remake their own worlds. (Greene, 1995, p. 170)

Rather, teaching—from the point of view of curriculum theory—is a matter of enabling students to employ academic knowledge (and popular culture, increasingly via the media and the Internet) to understand their own self-formation within society and the world...(Pinar et al., 2004, p. 16)

If we see education as a caring attending-to the being of our charges, we must allow space for selfhood. Fiction brings us across worlds, moves us across stages and states of being; turning from our self-gaze in mirrors, we look across to others through windows. In moving across these realms, we come to an understanding of ourselves. In caring for our students, we can support their self-formation through deep engagement with literature, not in a way that merely allows them to parrot the answers required by systems designed to sort them into an economic machine, but in ways that draw them across the threshold of empowerment to choose and shape their own lifeworlds.

In these conversations, participants and I speak often of negotiating—across cultures, across gender gaps, across time and space, across interior and exterior boundaries, across fictional and everyday lifeworlds. For all of us, crossing boundaries sustains such negotiations. A pedagogy that can take advantage of this quality of “acrossness” that we find in using fiction to inform our own becoming, could be very powerful indeed. Attending to the implications of moving across diverse lifeworlds can bring us to knowing that both resembles and our living and informs it anew. Certainly an approach to educating children and adolescents that focuses on connecting knowing to living would avert some of the persistent questions that I encountered as an educator: Why is it worthwhile to know this? What has this got to do with my life? Rather than treating reading as a step to desiccated analysis of plot, character, narrative arc, etc., we can be open to examining the reading experience and what it has meant to students.

Our lives are enriched by the knowledge of other cultures, other times, other ways of being in the world. Van Manen notes, “It is true that literature mobilizes many kinds of knowledge. It may encounter historical knowledge, scientific, philosophical, geographical, social, psychological knowledge; novels may even offer semiotic or phenomenological knowledge of the text, of writing, and of reading” (1985, p. 181). As educators, we can also take advantage of this quality of literature in using novels to teach within subject matters arenas besides English. Social studies are particularly well suited to this sort of border-crossing, and I do have experience in teaching classes that were coordinated with a social studies curriculum. In an earlier chapter, I have asserted how much I learned about the mores and customs of Nineteenth Century England through the works of Jane Austen. For the characters in these books, Napoleon is a current threat, not

a distant denizen of history. Students who engage with Austen's narrative could come away with a greater understanding of the immediacy and human tolls of Napoleonic wars. Multiple novels can be used to illuminate the American experience in the context of our history; for example, O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) provides enormous insight into the generation that fought in Vietnam.

The sensory immediacy of novels can also be useful in making other environments tangible to readers. Clarissa has spoken often of how her travel has been enhanced by encountering places she first discovered through reading. What fictional landscapes might give students a more complete image of a distant region? Another path to understanding the world of science might come through science fiction. How might we explore notions that once seemed only distantly possible, but have since come to fruition? What are the kinds of questions such exploration could raise about the progress of technology? Rosenblatt observes, "Literature gives us concrete evidence of how differently men have phrased their lives in different societies. But literature, by its very nature, helps also to bridge those differences" (2005, p. 53). Through narrative fiction, we can learn the details of divergent worlds applicable to a variety of subject areas, and can enhance our learning through engaging in meaningful consideration of what those details have meant to others, and what they might come to mean for us. Fiction allows us to reach across pedagogical borders of human understanding.

Shifting the Self through Pedagogical Borders

Through fiction, we are enlightened by insights into interactions between and among human beings and apply these lessons to our own relationships. We shape our lives through what we learn, and our being through how we make meaning of it. In the

reading we choose, as opposed to the reading imposed upon us by formal education, we create a construct of the world around us on our own terms. Aswell Doll asserts, “Surely, the project of trying to get oneself born (unboxed, untied, unskinned) is the great work of life” (2000, p. 165). In allowing for deep connection to reading, we become midwives for such birthing of selves.

Pedagogy that approaches literature as a space for caring makes room for learning and self-formation to be an ongoing process that builds upon what we have already experienced and learned. It is important to acknowledge that pedagogy can take place in myriad settings and within a multitude of relationships. Learning does not move in only one direction, nor does it happen only in instructional time. Understanding is not a monopoly of educational institutions. As we come to understand how the liminal space of fiction houses our possibilities for selfhood, perhaps we can learn to dwell more comfortably in educational borderlands. Henry Giroux says this of “border pedagogy:”

[It] speaks to the need to create pedagogical conditions in which students become border crossers in order to understand otherness in its own terms, and to further create borderlands in which diverse cultural resources allow for the fashioning of new identities within existing configurations of power. (1992, p. 28)

As readers of fiction, we move between states of being as the new experiences we bring to revisiting a book transform our current reading, and we take something different from the book to transform ourselves. “The strength of a great literary novel is that it provides us with a valuable and powerful human experience” (van Manen, 1985, p. 181). A pedagogy that recognizes the power of fiction to change our minds and to move us beyond what we take for granted is one that can also provide such an experience. Part of what we take for granted may be the power structure inherent in so much of the current

configuration of schooling. Fiction can provide a forum to open a conversation with students across that power structure and to begin to address the lack of meaning-making that we find in so many classrooms. One way to begin is to consider the power of relationships that novels bring to our consciousness. In our group conversation, Ms. Wordsmith talks about how novels make power structures visible to us:

Someone made the point—I think it was Gloria Steinem—...about *The Color Purple*. She says that *The Color Purple* speaks more about, or makes real, the evil of slavery and colonialism more than tomes of history and sociology and economics...That is something that books have instructed me on in a subliminal way. These are the power relations. These are the kinds of negotiations that have been going on between the sexes—things of that nature.

Once novels have uncovered the imbalances of power across economic, racial, and gender borders, we can use that opening to trouble our own notions of how education is conducted across classroom borders of teachers and learners. We can move across such boundaries as teacher-learners and learner-teachers. We can embrace the possibilities of expanding our own conception of valued knowledge to encompass what our students value as well. We can become conscious of the power of stories that Goodson points out:

Stories do social and political work as they are told. A story is never just a story—it is a statement of belief, of morality, it speaks about values. Stories carry loud messages both in what they say and what they don't say. They may accept political and social priorities without comment, or they may challenge those priorities. (1998, p. 12)

We can learn to listen for what may be unsaid, to listen for the voices that may be stilled by inequalities. We can learn to listen for the voices of our students themselves, and to make clear to them that the space we share is one in which they can be heard. A pedagogy opened up in this way creates an environment that can engender liberation,

and opens possibilities for students to engage in re-cognition of themselves and others.

We can then be companions in learning in the way that Freire describes:

Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object (far from being the end of the cognitive act) intermediates the cognitive actors—teacher on the one hand and students on the other. (1970/2004, p. 79)

What are the advantages of recasting students as cognitive and moral actors rather than passive receptors of information? Where does the conversation of literature lead us when they are full participants? “And that is what is at the core of literary narrative as a speech act: an utterance or a text whose intention is to initiate and guide a search for meanings among a spectrum of possible meanings” (Bruner, 1986, p. 25). Allowing students to construct meaning draws them into conversation that encourages self-reflection within the context of their own lives. Instead of an exercise that must be endured, exploration of a novel can then become an opportunity that supports “...imagination as the mode of grasping, of reaching out, that allows what is perceived to be transformed” (Greene, 1982/2001a, p. 59). Such attentiveness to perception and imagination leads to the transformation that represents real education, not just schooling. As we move through engagement with literature in a way that attends to development of selfhood within students, we can practice the exemplary pedagogy described by Levin:

But now, if we ponder what it *is* to teach ‘by example,’ we will soon realize that that kind of teaching works by virtue of an *exemplary embodiment*—an embodiment of virtue which *shows* it in its most visible *beauty*, *clarifies* it in its articulation of the truth, and *directly communicates its goodness* through the tangible power of feeling. (1985, p. 238)

Instead of operating as purveyors of knowledge, teachers can become participants in the self-storying of students, and partners in their self-building.

Greene writes, "...in an authentic aesthetic encounter, we are able to recognize how much depends upon our presentness, our attentiveness, our willingness to go out to the work at hand" (1981/2001e, p. 45). Bringing our students into the lifeworlds of fiction, where they may engage in deep conversation within themselves, can encourage such presentness and attentiveness. Greene describes the advantages of this approach. "Then there comes the elaboration, the discovery of the new, the unfamiliar, that which our imagination has disclosed for each of us personally in the lived, visible, and sounding world...the more we perceive, the more we can imagine..." (1987/2001b, p. 75). As we incorporate imagination into our learning, we can also move it into the real world, opening doors to new ways of being.

Opening Doors through the Humanities

A pedagogy that focuses on approaching fictional dwelling as an opportunity for opening up conversations that bring us into concerned relationships is one that is out of synch with the increasingly standardized orientation of most school systems. Greene reminds us that "A concern for the critical and the imaginative, for the opening of new ways of 'looking at things,' is wholly at odds with the technicist and behaviorist emphases we still find in American schools" (1988, p. 126). Steeves concurs, "But our education is based on the villainization of perception and the triumph of abstraction. No wonder, then, genius struggles to emerge" (2006, p. 101). "Genius," from the Latin *gignere*, to beget (Barnhart, 1988, p. 427), has metamorphosed in meaning through time, moving from the sense of a guiding spirit within each person at birth into the usage more common currently of a person with exceptional intellectual gifts. If we embrace a pedagogy of caring, however, might we not merge these two images? In recognizing and

attending to the essential being within our students, we can create an environment that allows their particular gifts to emerge. In an Associated Press interview, the author Victor Villaseñor illustrates how genius struggles to emerge in American classrooms.

In his talks to students, Victor Villaseñor likes to ask, “Who here is a genius?” If it’s a class of kindergartners, everyone’s hand shoots up, he says. If they’re in second or third grade, a few are bold enough to say yes. But once they’re out of elementary school, he says, there are no more geniuses. (Morgante, 2004)

In the ways that fiction opens up worlds, we may find opportunities to encourage our students to reclaim their individual genius.

After all, as Bruner notes, “...the author’s act of creating a narrative of a particular kind and in a particular form is not to evoke a standard reaction but to recruit whatever is most appropriate and emotionally lively in the reader’s repertory” (1986, p. 35). When we allow multiple viewpoints, we allow narrative to be a powerful catalyst for the presencing of selfhood. “For to treat reading as a bag of technical tricks is to devalue the sacred mystery at its heart” (Jane Resh Thomas, in Dorris & Buchwald, 1997, p. 255). In moving from a technicist orientation to one of caring, we create a pedagogy centered upon freedom to be oneself.

It is also important to examine the implications of such freedom in a social context. Who are the selves that we want to support our students in becoming? What are the best ways for those selves to engage with the world around us? What do we see as a pedagogy that makes us more human? As the pendulum of educational discourse has swayed toward the privileging of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (often expressed as STEM education), we can resist a technicist orientation and open worlds to our students through reading. Instead of devaluing the humanities, it is

important to use them to engage with the struggle of self-examination and self-reflection that bring us into authentic being. As educators, we need to remember that “To encounter others authentically is to work to free them for their possibilities of caring” (Anton, 2001, p. 157). Our care for our students liber-ates them to care for others, creating a common world that embraces multiple ways of authentic being.

As we engage with our students’ reading, we need to keep in mind our responsibility to be sensitive to the variety of their backgrounds; their socioeconomic environment can influence their access to the educational privilege that supports critical thinking over shallow, rote activities. As Anton pints out, “Selfhood, as discussed here, is a naturally historical accomplishment; it is operative beneath and beyond—and yet always in conjunction with—the content of socio-cultural creations” (2001, p. 152). As we take into account the socio-cultural creations that have shaped our students’ lives, we must consider accessibility to narratives from all walks of life, and the ways we can support their engagement with stories both inside and outside their experiences. Anton goes on to say, “The passionate responsibility of our being-with-others is not such that it removes the others’ concerns for them, but rather, it enables others to be free for their possibilities” (2001, p. 158). A humanistic focus allows us to guide our students in their inner struggles to attain their own humanity while acknowledging that of others. Noddings describes the interplay of self/other/community that we must encounter with concern and care:

It is right for students to understand the power of community—that we, as members of a community, act to preserve it and improve it; that we are affected by its habits in ways of which we may be unaware; that however much we may pride ourselves on individuality, we bear the marks of the community in which we are raised. (2005, pp. 117-118)

What do we do with what we read? When we approach reading as a springboard for meaning-making, we can do so in ways that allow for multiple contexts. Greene asks, “How can we create classroom situations in which significant dialogue might be encouraged once again, the live communication out of which there might emerge some consciousness of interdependence as well as a recognition of diverse points of view?” (1995, p. 177). Once again, we find ourselves at the threshold, where we wish to draw our students through the door into a multiplicity of worlds. As educators, we are responsible for opening up the conversations that lead them to think more deeply, and to be able to listen to what others have to say. Our self-reflection is not purely self-reflexive; we must also make room in our world for others, creating the common world described by Greene: “This common world...will be created by story, by giving voice to personal perspectives, listening to each others’ stories, seeking agreement, enlarging on it, and trying to expand the referent of what is shared” (1995, p. 68). We expand our sharing through a humanistic orientation, proliferating our store of referent material through our reading.

Rosenblatt reminds us that “Literature...deals with all that is basic in human life, from the most humble to the most ideal” (2005, p. 105). We support the authentic selfhood of our students when we use literature to connect them to the world, to illuminate the breadth of human experience. When we treat reading as a means of imaginative engagement with the world around us, when we embrace the sacred mystery at the heart of reading and the transforming conversations it can provoke, we engage in the kind of pedagogy described by bell hooks:

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who

also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (1994, p. 13)

Bell hooks goes on to remind us: “The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility” (1994, p. 207). When we embrace the messiness of real humanity, when we create locations of possibility for the genius of our students, we recognize beings who are not easily categorized, who may not fit neatly into assigned roles, who display all the individuality that makes them themselves. As readers, selves in search of our own being, we may aspire to be pirate queens or dragon slayers when those around us see us as mothers or nurses; we may envision bursting forth from dwellings that feel too constrictive; for many of us, fiction is the one place where such dreams may be realized. As educators, we can open our students’ eyes to new visions of themselves, and open doors to new landscapes in which they can build their own sacred spaces.

What is the lived experience of developing a sense of self through fiction? We have seen that it can be a dwelling that allows us to become, a pathway into the lifeworlds of others, an imaginative space that presents possibilities. We move across and back, between public and private, between other and self. Words transport us and transform us. Through imagination, we come to truth.

As we undertake the education of students, and as we engage in the lifelong *currere* of ourselves and others, let us hope to be led to discovery, understanding, and self-formation in multiple ways through our dwelling in fictional lifeworlds. Let us be led to look into mirrors to re-cognize and assess ourselves. Let us be led to look through

windows to learn about and from others. Let us be led to cross the thresholds and open the doors to move into action that expresses our inner being, honors that of others, and contributes to our concerned being-toward each other and our being-in-the-world. If we are led, educated in such ways, perhaps we can become the leaders who create connection, rather than isolation, through narrative, linking lifeworlds through language.

*We roll between cities in the darkened vehicle
A conglomerate of disparate lives, brought together by travel
A few talk to companions
But so many enter electronic worlds
I feel spectacularly old school as I tap the reading light,
Drawn deeply into story, another tale of disparity drawn into one event
While others gaze into screens, some tiny, some lap-sized
Glowing ghostily, sending shadows onto windows
To dance with colormotion in the silence
created by earbuds whispering isolation*

*I cross the fictional threshold and become a participant—
Now a concerned sibling, now a grieving mother,
Now an artist making fraught decisions
I pass through familiar landscapes peopled by new inhabitants
Recollection tinged by kaleidoscopic view
At times I glance up, surprised to see highway instead of city block*

*The tablet images seem such phantoms to me
The characters conjured by print so real*

*I regard my companions
Who, I wonder, among us
Has traveled farthest, returned changed? (McShane, 2010)*

APPENDIX A: LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear Participant:

Thank you for your interest in the research that I am conducting for my doctoral degree at the University of Maryland. The phenomenological study will explore the lived experience of creating a sense of self through reading fiction. I plan to examine this experience through two individual conversations with you, as well as a shared conversation with the group of participants. I will also ask you to write a short reflection on a book that has been particularly meaningful to you.

If you choose, you may be identified by a pseudonym in the published findings. After I complete the research, I will share what I learn with you.

I hope you will agree to participate by signing the attached consent form, and I look forward to your companionship on this journey. If you have any questions or want additional information, you may contact me by phone at 301-552-6572 or by e-mail at lshane20770@lycos.com.

Sincerely,

Laura M. McShane

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

Project Title	<i>Phenomenological Investigation of the Lived Experience of Creating a Sense of Self through Reading Fiction</i>
Why is this research being done?	<i>This is a research project being conducted by Laura M. McShane (student investigator) under the guidance of Dr. Francine Hultgren (Principal Investigator) at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you have expressed an interest in engaging in conversation about your experience in creating a sense of self through reading. The purpose of this research project is to develop an essential description of the lived experience of creating a sense of self through reading fiction. The pedagogical orientation of the research is related to an interest in the humanities and their place in the classroom, as well as in the place of imagination in the educational realm.</i>
What will I be asked to do?	<i>The procedures involve two individual conversations of approximately two hours' duration, conducted in a venue that is comfortable for the participant. Examples of questions to prompt conversations include: What is your experience of reading? What has been your experience of a book revealing you to yourself? Is there a particularly significant book that you feel is most emblematic of yourself? What have you learned about yourself through reading fiction? Participants will also be asked to write a short (5-7 pages) reflection on a book that has been important in their life, and to participate in a discussion involving the group of ~6 participants. The duration of participation is expected to be four to five months.</i>
What about confidentiality?	<i>We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, I will keep tapes and transcripts in locked files. Your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible, including use of a pseudonym chosen by you in dissertation materials. If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</i>
What are the risks of this research?	<i>There may be some risks from participating in this research study. Possible risks in this study could include discomfort in discussing life issues and disclosing personal information through stories or anecdotes about lived experiences.</i>
What are the benefits of this research?	<i>This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about the lived experience of creating a sense of self through reading fiction. The benefits to you could include could include greater self-knowledge. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through pedagogical improvements to the ways we engage with literature in instructing students.</i>

<p>Do I have to be in this research? May I stop participating at any time?</p>	<p><i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</i></p>	
<p>What if I have questions?</p>	<p><i>This research is being conducted by Laura M. McShane under the guidance of Dr. Francine Hultgren, EDPS, at the University of Maryland, College Park. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Dr. Francine Hultgren, 2203 Benjamin Building, 301-405-0866, fh@umd.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (e-mail) irb@deans.umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-0678</i> <i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i></p>	
<p>Statement of Age of Subject and Consent</p>	<p><i>Your signature indicates that:</i> <i>you are at least 18 years of age;</i> <i>the research has been explained to you;</i> <i>your questions have been fully answered; and</i> <i>you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.</i></p>	
<p>Signature and Date</p>	<p>NAME OF SUBJECT</p>	
	<p>SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT</p>	
	<p>DATE</p>	

**APPENDIX C: POTENTIAL QUESTIONS/PROMPTS
FOR ENGENDERING CONVERSATION**

What is your experience of reading?

How does this experience play out in the physical realm and in relationships?

What is it in fiction that calls to you?

What has been your experience of a book revealing you to yourself?

Tell me about a time when a book has been particularly important to you.

Is there a particularly significant book that you feel is most emblematic of yourself?

Are there books you return to again and again? What is it about these books that draws you back to them?

Have you found that you experience the same book differently as you age and your life changes?

What books would you recommend to others who were facing life questions, and why?

When you identify with characters, are they similar to or different from one another?

What have you learned about yourself through reading fiction?

Have you ever “turned against” a book later in life?

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