Sara Whiteley* and David Peplow

Interpreting real and fictional worlds in interaction: A socio-cognitive approach to reading group talk

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Abstract: This paper analyses how representations of real life and fictional worlds are combined and differentiated in the talk produced in literary reading groups. We adopt a socio-cognitive approach to reading group interaction, which combines discourse analysis and Text World Theory to examine the social and cognitive processes enacted in examples of such talk. Text World Theory is a cognitive linguistic discourse analysis framework which examines the mental spaces ("worlds") cued by language-in-use and the ontological relations between those worlds. This combined framework is applied to four extracts of reading group talk and facilitates the discussion of the structural, referential and representational aspects of the interaction. Our analysis considers the insights which reading group talk provides into the complex relationships between text and talk. We argue that ontological shifting in reading group talk performs various functions, such as claiming expertise, doing humour and play, and mitigating face-threatening disagreement. Talking about texts allows people these options for shifting between representations of real life and fictional worlds and this may go some way towards accounting for the popularity of such groups in contemporary culture.

Keywords: reading groups, literary interpretation, discourse analysis, cognitive stylistics, Text World Theory, ontology

1 Introduction

Reading groups (also known as book groups)[1] are collectives who come together regularly to talk about a literary work, most typically a novel. Studies in the US and

***Corresponding author: Sara Whiteley**, School of English, The University of Sheffield, Jessop West, 1 Upper Hanover Street, Sheffield, S3 7RA, England, UK,
E-mail: sara.whiteley@sheffield.ac.uk
David Peplow: Department of Humanities, Sheffield Hallam University, Floor 11 Owen Building, Howard Street, Sheffield, S1 1WB, England, UK, E-mail: d.peplow@shu.ac.uk

UK in the early 2000s noted an 'explosive growth' (Long 2003: 19, see also Hartley 2002) in reading group membership which continues to be evident today (Peplow et al. 2016: 2). As a very popular and culturally salient form of social engagement around literature, book groups have attracted increasing academic interest in a number of fields. Within linguistics, two broad approaches to book groups have emerged: interactional research focussing on the discursive practices that these groups typically engage in (e. g. Benwell 2012), and stylistic research looking at the ways in which the linguistic structures of literary texts relate to readers' interpretations (e. g. Peplow et al. 2016). This paper combines elements from these two approaches in order to analyse examples of reading group discussion. We specifically focus on the following question: how do reading group members construct and orient to the contents of a literary text in the process of social interaction? In addressing this question we are concerned with two key aspects of reading group talk: first, how do readers in these groups shift between talking about real life and the fictional worlds of a literary text? And second, how do readers use discussions of the literary text to accomplish some interactional work such as mitigating disagreement, being playful, and claiming expertise?

In Section 2 we offer a review of relevant research on book groups and reading practices, and introduce analytical approaches to the study of "worlds" in discourse. Section 3 provides more detail about our methods and analytical framework. Section 4 applies the framework to four examples in order to examine the ways in which reading group members merge and shift between real and fictional worlds in their interaction.

2 Literature review

2.1 Academic approaches to reading group talk

Studies of contemporary culture have identified reading groups as sites of socially and culturally situated reading practices distinct from those of the academy (e. g. Hartley 2002; Long 2003; Radway 1991). In linguistics, work has focused on the discursive activity which forms these reading practices, and examination of the conversational structure of reading group talk using methods from conversation analysis and interactional sociolinguistics (e. g. Allington 2011; Benwell 2009, 2012; Peplow 2011; Swann and Allington 2009). These studies demonstrate the way language is employed in the construction of individual and group stances and

1 Other terms for these groups include book clubs and reading circles.

identities, and the management of group relationships, as well as illuminating the nature of the informal argumentation exhibited in reading group discussion.

Reading group discussion has also attracted interest in reader-response oriented areas of literary study such as the fields of stylistics and cognitive stylistics, where it is regarded as a site for the observation of readers' responses to literary texts (Myers 2009; Peplow et al. 2016: 30–60; Swann and Allington 2009). Stylistic studies use reading group talk to illuminate the nature of literary reading and to inform the close, linguistic analysis of textual meaning. In these approaches, texts are regarded as "heteronomous objects" which come into being when engaged by an observing consciousness (Ingarden 1973a, 1973b; Stockwell 2002: 135–6), and thus literary meanings are seen to arise through an interaction between reader and text. Within cognitive approaches to literature, the contents of literary texts are discussed using a well-established "text-as-world" metaphor (Emmott 1997; Fauconnier 1994; Gavins 2007; Herman 2002; Ryan 1991b, 1998; Werth 1999). This metaphor posits that readers mentally represent not just the linguistic elements of a text (such as its words, sentences and propositions) but also the extra-linguistic realm to which it refers (the characters, objects, facts and states of affairs which form the "world" of the text) (Ryan 1998: 138–9). Summarising the findings from discourse analytical and stylistic approaches, therefore, reading groups can be seen as engaged in a form of "social reading" (Peplow et al. 2016: 30) in which multiple interactants co-construct and debate their interpretations of literary worlds, pressing literary texts into service for conversational purposes (Long 2003: 147–8). Sections 2.2 and 2.3 review current theoretical approaches to texts as "worlds" within cognitive stylistics and narratology, as these feed in to the analytical approach adopted in this paper.

2.2 Text world theory: Analysing "worlds" in discourse

The socio-cognitive approach developed in this paper is grounded in the discourse processing framework, Text World Theory (Gavins 2007; Werth 1999), which has been developed most extensively in the field of cognitive stylistics (e. g. Stockwell 2002, 2009; Whiteley 2011). Text World Theory posits that the use of language in interaction with others ("discourse") involves the creation of mental representations, called "text-worlds" in the minds of speakers and hearers. These mental models (Werth 1999: 84) are created through the interaction between linguistic cues (the "text") and a person's knowledge, perceptions and inferences. Text World Theory also posits that the particular areas of knowledge which are required for the processing of a discourse, as determined by the text, form the "discourse-world": the immediate contextual situation. The discourse-world concept aligns

with widely accepted ideas about the importance of context in linguistic meaning and communication, and particularly with work which regards discourse context as comprised of participants' subjective mental models (van Dijk 2014). In characterising the types of knowledge which form part of the discourse-world, Werth (1999: 101–2) distinguishes between linguistic, experiential, cultural and perceptual knowledge. More recently, Peplow et al. (2016) incorporate Littleton and Mercer's (2013) distinction between "background common knowledge" and "dynamic common knowledge" in their analysis of the discourse-worlds of spoken interaction. Background common knowledge is that which any established member of a community might take for granted as being shared with other members of that community, and dynamic common knowledge is that which is accumulated through a particular discourse.

As an example of a text-world approach to written, literary discourse, consider sitting down to read a novel. Before the cover has been opened, the discourse-world has already been formed from the reader's intention to engage in discourse. Knowledge about the text type will likely have been activated, leading to expectations about how the discourse will proceed. Upon beginning the first chapter, a reader draws on the linguistic cues in the novel and their own knowledge to form a text-world representation, which is updated as the discourse progresses. Text-worlds typically represent dynamic scenarios with spatio-temporal coordinates featuring entities and objects in relationships with one another (Werth 1999: 81–3, see also van Dijk 2006: 169). In the context of a novel, this will likely be the characters, their location and their interactions. Linguistic features which indicate the deictic and referential parameters of a text-world, such as noun phrases, verb tense and locatives, are known as "world-builders" (Werth 1999: 52). Most discourses involve the creation of multiple, related text-worlds as the deictic features of a representation shift, for instance when flashbacks are represented, or when indicators of modality and negation are used (Gavins 2007: 91–123). As reading progresses, relevant areas of knowledge are incremented into the discourse-world. At first, the discourse-world may comprise largely of background common knowledge which the reader has regarding the scenarios represented in the text, but as the novel progresses, dynamic common knowledge, such as the identity and traits of various characters, will also be drawn upon during text-world creation.

Text World Theory is partly influenced by the narratological theory of possible worlds which posits that "all texts project a system of worlds, that is, a modal *universe*" (Ryan 1991a: 554). In possible-world terms, readers and authors inhabit the "actual world" or "real world", and fictional texts create "alternative possible worlds" which depart in some ways from the actual world (Ryan 1991a, 1991b). The worlds created by a fictional text might depart from the actual world in terms of: members (e. g. they may feature invented characters with no counterpart in the real

world); the inventory and properties of objects (e. g. they may contain inventions which do not exist in the real world); natural laws and logic (e. g. time may be non-linear, animals may be able to talk etc.); or in terms of analytic truths (e. g. historical events may have turned out differently) (Ryan 1991a: 558–9). In Text World Theory terms, the alternative possible worlds cued by a literary work are "text-worlds". The discourse-world is a conceptualisation of the actual world generated for the purposes of the discourse, containing (as discussed above) the relevant knowledge needed for text-world construction.

Narratological and stylistic studies of reading have long recognised the permeability of ontological boundaries between the "real world" and the "text-worlds" created by fictional narratives. The creation of text-worlds involves the projection of knowledge from the discourse-world, as readers "fill in the gaps in the text by assuming the similarity of the fictional world to their own experiential reality" (Ryan 2020: para. 6). Readers are thought to experience the contents of fictional literary works by using the same psychological processes they use in experiencing real life (e. g. Gerrig 1993; Stockwell 2002, 2009). As such, reading fiction involves the construction of complex relationships between worlds: as Ryan points out, both author and reader "know that there is only one actual world", but, during the creation/reception of fiction "they behave *as if* the foreign world at the centre of the textual universe existed independently of the text, and as if it were the actual one" (1991a: 555). Thus, reading fiction is characterised by an "open gesture of recentering, through which an alternative possible world is placed at the centre of the conceptual universe" (Ryan 1991a: 556).

2.3 Real and fictional worlds in reading group talk

Despite being developed most extensively in the analysis of written, literary discourse, Text World Theory has also been applied to non-fictional, spoken interaction (e. g. Browse 2018; Gavins 2007; Peplow et al. 2016). The text-worlds created by a solitary reading experience, as discussed in the novel reading example in Section 2.2 above, are relatively simple compared with the discourse situation created during spoken interaction. During talk, speakers' utterances create and develop text-worlds across sequences of interaction. As a result, the analytical focus shifts away from text-worlds as spaces conceived within the mind of an individual, to text-worlds as external representations of the conceptualisations of the speakers.

Reading group talk also involves the creation of a "system of worlds", reflecting the ontological "recentering" which is involved in the reading of fiction (Ryan 1991a: 556). Through their talk, group members often construct text-worlds which represent the fictional worlds of the novel as though they were equivalent to the actual world. For

instance, they might discuss fictional characters as though they were real people, or assume that fictional worlds operate in the same way as the real world. Peplow (2016, following Phelan 2005) refers to this style of reading as "mimetic" reading and emphasises its centrality in the reading group talk he examines. Peplow (2016) also notes that reading group discussion can encompass other reading styles which highlight the fictionality of the literary work, for instance "synthetic" reading which considers texts as the constructed products of an author (see Section 4.1), or "thematic" reading which relates textual contents to wider cultural, ideological, philosophical or ethical real-world issues (see Section 4.2). Reading group talk involves the construction and interrelation of various text-worlds with different ontological status. Text-worlds might reference the literary work (representing scenes from the text, characters' thoughts or possible futures, or hypothetical events developing scenes in the text) or reference the actual world (for instance, by representing the current discourse situation, a speaker's past experiences, or current thoughts and opinions). Sometimes readers' utterances construct a distinction between real and fictional worlds and shift between them, and at other times readers' utterances merge the real and the fictional, blending these ontological realms. Furthermore, this interpretative movement between worlds performs interactional and relational functions within all the groups considered in this study.

3 Data and methodology

The book groups that form the data of this paper were established groups operating in various locations in England. Some of the groups were based in libraries, and are therefore open to the public, while others were more private, meeting in members' homes. In all cases, however, the groups were stable in their membership, with the same participants regularly attending. Recordings of meetings were collected from these groups, sometimes with the researcher present as an observer and other times with the researcher absent. In all cases discussed in this paper, the book groups are discussing contemporary novels, although on other occasions these groups, and the others we have studied, read other genres of text: e. g. older works of fiction, poetry, short stories. All data presented in this paper was collected following ethical approval from institutional review boards, and all participants provided informed consent. All participants' names have been changed.

Our analysis of the reading group recordings presented below proceeds from the notion that in the context of a reading group, discussion and interpretation of the text is both a social process, consisting of interaction, and a cognitive process, involving knowledge and conceptualisation. Therefore, it is appropriate to combine discourse analytical and cognitive linguistic approaches to examine the form and content of the talk. Furthermore, our approach regards cognitive and social processes as enacted

through language (here, written transcriptions of recorded group meetings) and evidenced not just in the content of what is said but also in the structure of talk.

The combined "socio-cognitive" approach to reading group talk used here is consistent with developments in discourse studies which advance the compatibility of social and cognitive theories (e. g. Clark 1992, 1996; Croft 2009; Geerarts et al. 2010; Harder 2010; te Molder and Potter 2005; van Dijk 2014; Verhagen 2005). The analytical approach was first developed in the final chapter of Peplow et al. (2016), and in this paper we apply it to new interactional examples, with a distinct focus on the ontological relationships between real life and fiction established in the talk.

Following Allington and Benwell (2012), we are interested in how the management of interpersonal relationships coexists with the production of literary interpretations in reading group talk. Our discourse analysis of the reading group interaction is influenced by conversation analysis as we approach talk as a highly structured phenomenon, with "order at all points" (Sacks 1984: 22). Through careful and detailed analysis of the interaction, we investigate the relationship between the sequential organisation of the talk and the actions performed by the speakers (e. g. agreeing, requesting, assessing). We are concerned with how such everyday, or "mundane", social actions are performed in the talk (Psathas 1995: 1), especially how readers present claims and counter-claims as reasoned and reasonable, how readers engage in humour and play, and how potentially fractious disagreement is avoided.

We also examine the text-worlds constructed by the reading groups' talk. Section 4.1 provides some initial examples of the way reading group participants merge or shift between worlds representing real and fictional scenarios in order to claim and demonstrate expertise, and to engage in play and humour. In Section 4.2 we discuss an extended example in which ontological shifting serves to mitigate disagreement.

4 Analysis

4.1 Merging and shifting between worlds: Initial examples

Extract 1 provides a monologic example of text-world creation, as Mark, a member of a reading group referred to as *Contemporary Group* (see Peplow 2016: 23-28) invokes his real life educational background whilst discussing the novel *Harvest* (Crace 2013).

Extract 1 Real world knowledge and 'unfair' advantages.

1	T1	M	what fascinated me about the book ((laughs)) one of my
2			(1.0) throughout my life what has fascinated me (1.0)
3			is agriculture (0.5) right
4	T2	D	Mhmn

5	T3	M	I taught it (0.5) you know (.) I did it as a big part of
6			it in university about agricultural change in the
7			sixteenth century (.) so in a sense it was a bit unfair
8			(.) I knew exactly where he was to start with so I knew
9			that we were talking about the open field system=
10	T4	D	=yeah
11	T5	M	=we were on a (0.5) on a village which was totally
12			self-contained (0.5) that never went outside its own
13			boundaries and its aim was <purely to survive> there
14			was nothing else

(M = Mark; D = Debbie)[2].

Extract 1 demonstrates the way that reading group talk can create interrelations between representations of the literary work and real life. Mark portrays his real world identity and experience as highly relevant to his interpretation of the fictional world of the book, rapidly moving between representations of his life and the contents of the novel. In this storytelling sequence, Mark is allowed extended turns to frame his assessment of *Harvest*, with minimal responses coming from Debbie. Mark frequently invokes his background knowledge as a basis for his positive opinion and as a reason for his sense of immersion in the world of the novel: he "knew exactly" where and when the novel was set.

Mark's utterances represent several scenarios that are deictically remote from the moment of the interaction. The first text-world cued by Mark's utterance represents a prior moment of reading (indicated by world-builders such as past simple verb tense ("fascinated") and reference to "me" and "the book" (L1)), although one aspect of this text-world, the source of Mark's fascination, is left unspecified through the use of "what". The locative "throughout my life" (L2) creates a switch to a new text-world representing a more longstanding state of affairs, Mark's fascination with agriculture. By making associations between these two worlds (Mark being fascinated by something in the novel, and Mark being fascinated by agriculture in general) it is possible to infer that Mark's interest in the novel relates to its portrayal of agricultural processes. Further explanation of this interest in agriculture is provided by another text-world, which represents a specific experience from Mark's past (his education in agriculture) indicated by world-building items such as the simple past ("taught") and locative "in university" (L5-6). By providing the group with information about his past experiences, Mark's utterances contribute to the dynamic common knowledge generated during the discussion and establish the relevance of his real life experiences in his reading of the text.

2 See appendix for Transcription Key.

Mark goes on to represent his prior knowledge of agriculture as resulting in a particularly immersive reading experience. He expresses a strong degree of certainty concerning his understanding of the book, repeating the factive verb "I knew" (L8) before elaborating his sense of the novel's setting. Interestingly, in his discussion of the fictional world of the novel, Mark's choice of world-builders (specifically, pronouns, verbs and locatives) represents the reader and character/narrator as interlocutors and as physically co-present in the setting of the book: "I knew that *we were talking about*" (L8-9), and "*we were on* … a village which was totally self-contained" (L11-12, emphasis added). These text-worlds merge the real and the fictional by portraying the fictional character/narrator as capable of direct address to Mark. Mark goes on to attribute a series of properties to the village portrayed in the novel (e. g. it is "totally self-contained" and had an "aim … purely to survive" (L11-13)). This further compounds the merging of real and fictional worlds, as it is by virtue of Mark's prior knowledge of agriculture gained during his lifetime (and represented in previous text-worlds) that he is able to offer such detailed descriptions of the setting of the fictional world.

Mark's initial utterances represent scenarios from his real life which have relevance to the fictional world of the book, so that when he comes to representing the fictional world of the novel, the two ontological realms become interrelated: he is represented as co-present in the fictional world with the character/narrator, and able to elaborate on the setting of that world. Combined, the text-worlds Mark creates function to portray him as a knowledgeable and immersed reader, both of which perhaps lend some authority to his interpretative stance on the book.

The more dialogic interaction in Extract 2 also shows reading group participants relating real life knowledge to fictional worlds in order to construct an informed interpretation of the book. Extract 2 is taken from a reading group's discussion of *Solo* by William Boyd (2013), with the readers discussing the main character in the novel, James Bond. This discussion exhibits a sharper distinction between text-worlds which refer to real life and text-worlds which refer to the novel.

Extract 2 Army people I went to school with.

1	T1	L	a lot of the army people I went to school with that have been
2			married and are divorced again so yes you can't help but
3	T2	H	and particularly when you know you are going from one air base to another
4	T3	L	=mmm
5	T4	H	=it is bound to be disruptive

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6  T5  L   oh yes that must be a difficult (1.0) I mean his lifestyle isn't
7          [conducive to commitment is it
8  T6  Mo  [no no
9  T7  L   but erm
10 T8  Mo  he didn't really have a soul in any way [did he
11 T9  L                                          [no
12 T10 Mo  there was no depth of feeling to him just total (.) physical
13         pleasure (1.5) the cars (.) the women
(L = Laura; H = Hannah; Mo = Molly).
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The readers in this extract shift between representing the real world and the literary text in order to understand the main character. This is achieved in a highly collaborative manner: Laura and Hannah offer representations of the real world, and Laura and Molly follow this with assessments of Bond's character. Laura initially invokes her own experience of "army people" with whom she attended school, observing that these individuals are now divorced (Turn 1). Hannah adds to this by specifying that "going from one air base to another" is particularly "disruptive" for these relationships (Turns 2 and 4). Laura's evaluation at Turn 5 that the situation must be "difficult" initially refers to the real world relationships they have been discussing, but the movement from this discussion back to the fictional character in the second TCU of this turn, following the 1 second pause, observes that James Bond's situation is likewise difficult. The shift to the representation of the fictional world and the specifics of the character is established with the reference to "his lifestyle" (L6). The group remain focused on the fictional character for the remainder of the extract. This example shows that, in a similar way to Extract 1, shifts between the real world and the fictional world can also serve the function of strengthening a group's position on a text by providing insight into a character or a narrative event.

Another example of the merging of real and fictional worlds is evident in Extract 3, from a reading group discussion of *The Universe versus Alex Woods* by Gavin Extence (2013). The participants are discussing the believability of the characters in the novel, and taking turns to offer examples. In Turn 2, Shirley nominates the protagonist's mother as a believable character.

Extract 3 Visiting a fictional shop.

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1   T1   G   I mean they were very believable weren't they
             … ((some lines omitted))
10  T2   S   and his mu:::m ha[ha
11  T3   ?                   [ha
12  T4   S   I [mean
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13  T5   P    [pretty lovely description of his mum wasn't it really
14  T6   S  yeah yeah
15  T7   P  did they live in Glastonbury
16  T8   M  yeah [yeah
17  T9   ?       [yeah [yeah
18  T10  ?             [exactly [yeah
19  T11  M                      [yeah I think nearby
20  T12  S  and you could imagine the shop she ran [you know yeah
21  T13  ?                                         [she ran yeah
22  T14  ?  yeah yeah
23  T15  P  I think I've [been in it actually
24  T16  S               [hahahaha
25  T17  J  what did you buy
26  T18  K  did you have your (1.0) tarot card ((read))
(G = Georgina; S = Shirley; P = Peter; M = Marcus; J = Julian; K = Kate).
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Agreeing with Georgina's and Shirley's assessment of the characters as "believable" (L1 and L10), Peter suggests that the way the text was written contributed to that believability: "pretty lovely description of his mum wasn't it" (L13). A synthetic reading style is evident in the explicit reference to the text as a construction ("description") and the use of the past tense to refer to a prior real world reading experience and to invite agreement from the others ("wasn't it"). Peter then shifts to a more mimetic style of reading (L15), which merges the real and fictional worlds by referring to the characters ("they") as though they were real people inhabiting a real world location: "did they live in Glastonbury" (instead of, 'was the novel set in Glastonbury', for instance). Shirley, on the other hand, maintains a more synthetic style by emphasising the reader's act of imagination in constructing the fictional world: "you could imagine the shop she ran" (L20). This utterance creates two text-worlds: one representing a reader ("you") engaged in a past act of imagining, and an embedded text-world depicting the content of that imagined world ("the shop she ran"). Shirley's utterance makes a clear distinction between real and fictional worlds, which Peter playfully problematizes: "I've been in it actually" (L23). The pronoun "it" refers anaphorically to "the shop" present in Shirley's text-worlds, and Peter represents a past version of himself as present in this fictional location. This utterance merges the real and the fictional in a singularly extreme and absurd manner, creating humour, and is met with laughter and further play from other readers (L24-26). It has been observed that interactional "play" is an important element of reading group discourse (Peplow et al. 2016: 108–112), and, as well as evidencing the believability of the book, the

merging of ontological realms in Extract 2 is key to establishing and performing such playful interaction.

In this section we have presented three extracts of reading group talk in which the participants merge and shift between real and fictional worlds in their talk in order to claim and demonstrate expertise, and to engage in play and humour. In the following section we focus on one extended extract of talk that involves readers shifting between worlds in order to mitigate disagreement.

4.2 Shifting between worlds: Extended analysis

In this section we focus in detail on an extract of talk in which readers move between real world and fictional worlds when discussing a controversial topic. This reading group is referred to as *Wanderers* (for detailed information on this group, see Peplow 2016: 13–17) and is comprised of 7 members in total: 5 females and 2 males. All group members were present at this meeting, although 2 did not contribute turns at talk to this particular extract. The literary work under discussion in this meeting is *Flight Behaviour* by Barbara Kingsolver (2012). The novel is set in the Appalachian mountains, and concerns a working-class mother, Dellarobia, and her encounters with a scientist, Dr Ovid Byron, who is investigating the effect of global warming on the behaviour of butterflies. The text features a third-person narrative which is focalised through Dellarobia, and follows her as she deals with problems within her family and community, learns about the effects of climate change and re-examines her own goals and aspirations. In particular, Dellarobia reflects upon her marriage to Cub, a sheep farmer and father of her two children, and whether her life with him enables her to realise her own ambitions or potential.

The extract comes from around 15 min into the reading group discussion. Prior to this extract the group had been discussing the character of Dellarobia and at the very start of this extract we can see the conclusion of this talk. At Turns 1 and 2, Hannah and Molly describe Dellarobia's awareness of her own potential as an "epiphany" which changes her life, and then Max begins to reflect upon the effect of Dellarobia's ambition on her husband Cub from Turn 3. As Cub is not a focaliser in the novel, the literary work does not provide readers with direct access to his mind or perceptions. Across the extract, Max, Laura and Hannah are involved in constructing Cub's point of view and discussing his character traits. When Max relates a scenario in the novel to real life, some interactional trouble ensues.

Extract 4 Gender roles and *Flight Behaviour*.

1	T1	H	I mean she has (0.5) Dellarobia has a kind of epiphany doesn't
2			she when she's working with Ovid that she could be a scientist
3			that she could pull her brain back together and get on
4	T2	Mo	yeah and she gave up smoking didn't she
5	T3	Ma	in a way though you felt quite (0.5) sympathetic towards her
6			husband Cub (1.0)
7	T4	H	y[es
8	T5	Ma	[because he is a very easy going man
9	T6	Mo	=yes
10	T7	Ma	erm (0.5) and he doesn't demand much at all (0.5) does he (1.0)
11			of li[fe
12	T8	H	[no
13	T9	Ma	erm (1.0) and he realised obviously that his wife is much
14			cleverer than he is
15	T10	H	=mmm
16	T11	Ma	and I often wonder (.) how that sort of relationship works out
17			in real life
18	T12	H	=mmm
19	T13	Ma	erm (1.0) because it does happen sometimes doesn't it
20	T14	H	=[mmm
21	T15	Mo	=[mmm
22	T16	Ma	=you get people (0.5)
23	T17	L	yes
24	T18	Ma	I mean GENerally it is the other way round that most women
25			marry men more intelligent than themselves or (0.5) better
26			off than themselves
27	T19	H	((gasps))
28	T20	L	really
29			((general laughter and disbelief))
30	T21	Ma	you KNOW (.) it's a fact
31	H		HOHAHOHA[HOHAHAHAHAHAHAHA
32	T23	L	[it is not a fact
33	T24	Ma	ooh
34	T25	H	=oooh
35	T26	Mo	I am not so sure on that one haha

36	T27	H	=hahahaha ahhhh
37	T28	R	I guess there was an era when pretending to be stupid was
38			considered attractive
39	T29	Mo	haha yes
40	T30	R	b- but I am not sure it's entirely true anymore
41			((general laughter))
42	T31	Ma	no probably not nowadays (0.5) not today
43			((general laughter))
44	T32	Ma	I am referring to the (1.0)
45	T33	H	CAREFUL Max [hahahahaha
46	T34	Ma	[the people in the book
47	T35	R	yeah [that's true
48	T36	L	[depends what you mean (.) I am not sure how (0.5)
49	T37	Ma	pardon
50	T38	L	as a man how is it to feel (0.5)
51	T39	Ma	it [feel
52	T40	L	[that the woman is more intelligent
53	T41	Ma	=yeah [it would be difficult yes
54	T42	L	[for that sort of a man in that sort of environment
55	T43	Ma	=and there is a lot of men who wouldn't be able to cope with that
56			situation
57			[at all
58	T44	L	[yeah
59	T45	H	well [YES
60	T46	Ma	[whereas he [does
61	T47	L	[yes in that sort of environment
62	T48	H	=but he got her pregnant (.) so he had to do the right thing

(H = Hannah; Mo = Molly; L = Laura; Ma = Max; R = Robert).

The talk begins in a fairly innocuous fashion, with Max offering his assessment of the character of Cub and articulating his attitude towards him (L5). His comments become increasingly controversial in the group, as he makes generalisations about gender roles in heterosexual relationships "in real life" (Turns 11–18). Following widespread disagreement from the other readers, Max claims he was just talking about "the people in the book" (Turns 32 and 34). These conversational moves demonstrate how conceptualisations of real life and literary works are negotiated through talk, and how interpersonal factors affect this within the group.

The construction of text-worlds in Turns 1–2 performs mimetic reading, discussing Dellarobia as though she were a real person. Dellarobia is represented as experiencing mental states ("she has … a kind of epiphany") and exhibiting

behaviour which is indicative of mental processes (e. g. "she gave up smoking" as evidence of her epiphany). At Turn 3, Max begins to discuss Cub's character, expressing sympathy for him. This sympathetic stance is marked as different from the prior discussion, with a lack of alignment evident in the preference organisation of Max's turn: opening with "in a way though" pushes the counter-claim back in the turn, thus mitigating the disagreement but also showing that there is a counter-claim in the offing. The use of "you" offers an account of the reading experience designed to include others in the group, as does the use of the tag question at line 17, and these features successfully solicit agreement and positive feedback from others (Turns 4–10).

Max justifies this feeling of sympathy for Cub by continuing the mimetic reading, representing the character's enduring personality traits (Turns 5 and 7) and thoughts (Turn 9). At Turn 11 Max moves on to discuss heterosexual relationships "in real life", initially comparing Cub's intelligence with that of his wife (Turn 9), and then using this intelligence gap between fictional husband and wife to frame a discussion of similar relationships outside the book, a move that initiates a shift from mimetic reading to thematic reading as the fictional characters are presented as indexical of their respective genders. Max creates a text-world that represents his habitual real world actions in the present tense, starting with "I often wonder … " (Turn 11).

This representation of Max's own thoughts is then fleshed out over the course of his subsequent contributions (Turns 13–18), in which he represents his views of the relative intelligence of men and women in relationships. The explicit world-building locative "in real life" and the distal deixis in "that sort of relationship" in Turn 11 signal a shift away from the particulars of the characters' relationship to more generalised observations. Other world-building locatives used across the subsequent turns, such as "sometimes" (Turn 13), "generally" (Turn 18) and reference to "people" (Turn 16) and "most women" (Turn 18), further signal that Max's text-world is a generalised representation of everyday life rather than a representation of scenarios from the novel. He continues to seek support from other members of the group using the tag question format (Turn 13), encouraging others in the group to compare their views with his own. By shifting his reference from the text to real life Max introduces a new area of background common knowledge into the discourse-world, and the participants are required to draw on their knowledge about real-world relationships and gender politics.

For the other participants, trouble starts when Max begins to offer a thematic reading of the novel by relating it to wider real-world issues, and specifically when he states that "most women marry men more intelligent than themselves or better off than themselves" (Turn 18). Prior to this, other readers in the group seem to be in agreement with Max's suggestion that Cub and Dellarobia's "sort of relationship" might be difficult, offering supportive back-channelling and

feedback (Turns 4–17). At Turn 18, however, Max begins to generalise, stating that women often marry more intelligent or "better off" men. The stress on the first syllable of "generally" highlights that Max may be aware that this is a problematic utterance and that some form of mitigation is required. In spite of this turn-initial mitigation, Max's comment is still heard as offensive and highly problematic by the other readers, with in-draws of breath (Turn 19), laughter (Turn 22), expressions of shock ("oooh", Turn 25), and disbelief ("really?", Turn 20). Max recognises that these responses are antagonistic, and he defends his view by claiming that it is "a fact" (Turn 21). The other readers reply with further expressions of disagreement (Turns 23 and 26), shocked humour (Turn 27), and rejoinders to Max's view (Turn 28). Robert, for instance, offers a representation of real life located in the past in which "pretending to be stupid" was attractive (Turn 28), which seems aligned with Max's view, but Robert counters by saying that this is no longer true (Turn 30). In response, Max tries a different form of defence by claiming that his problematic comments were only in reference to the book and are not applicable to real life: "I am referring to the people in the book" (Turns 32 and 34). Although his earlier utterance (Turn 18) seemed to be making more general claims than this, his argument is now recontextualised as being strictly in reference to the book. Knowledge about the book, which was falling into neglect as the conversation focused on participants' perceptions of gender politics in society more generally, is now reinstated as part of the discourse-world. This turn back to the specific relationship described in the work of fiction serves to deflect discussion of the controversial issue, moving the talk onto safer interactional ground for the group, while also enabling Max to explain and account for his comments on heterosexual relationships.

Following Max's justification, Laura reformulates his position in a more general and, potentially, acceptable manner. From Turn 36, Laura questions how it must "feel" for men to be in Cub's position but, implicitly orienting to the category of "female", Laura discloses her lack of entitlement to answer this question (Turns 36 and 38). Laura and Max then compare Cub's reaction to his situation with the likely reactions of typical men outside the novel (Turn 43 and 46). These statements about men are qualified and situated in relation to the world of the novel: "for that sort of man in that sort of environment" (Turn 42) and "in that sort of environment" (Turn 47). After claiming that many men "wouldn't be able to cope with that situation at all" (Turn 43), Max explicitly relates this to Cub's behaviour: "whereas he does" (Turn 46). This short passage of talk is highly collaborative, displaying "co-reading" in which readers are jointly constructing turns at talk in quick succession and co-constructing text-worlds (Peplow et al. 2016: 91). The utterances are jointly produced with affiliative overlap between speakers (Turns 46–47), latching across turns (Turns 42–43), and agreement foregrounded in turns

(Turn 41) – all of which are typical features of preferred agreement (Pomerantz 1984). This passage of agreement returns the discussion quickly to an affable footing, perhaps so as to preserve the relationships between group members and to protect Max from further criticism. In this passage Max is also positioned as someone who can best reflect on questions of masculine identity, a position that is presumably underpinned by his category entitlement as a man talking about a male character. It is interesting and perhaps testament to the group's abilities to engage in friendly talk that after the group show disagreement with Max's assessment of male/female relationships, he is then called upon to arbitrate over statements about how men would be likely to act in Cub's position.[3] The group and Max work to link these statements back to the fictional world, re-establishing mimetic reading and dealing with controversial issues, such as gender, through the perceptions of characters rather than emanating more directly from the readers.

Extract 4 provides insight into how this particular fictional text, *Flight Behaviour*, and the situations and ideologies it represents, are employed by readers in interaction. As well as being an eco-critical work about the impact of climate change, *Flight Behaviour* is also read by critics as a "feminist story" (Wagner-Martin 2014: 4, see also Mahato 2015). The novel proffers a feminist ideological stance through its portrayal of Dellarobia's struggle to pursue her own ambitions within the traditional, patriarchal culture of the small rural community in which she lives. At the close of the novel, she has transformed from an unhappily married "stay-at-home mom" (Kingsolver 2012: 59) to a happily divorced, newly-enrolled college student. Dellarobia's movement away from the gender constraints of the lifestyle that she had previously inhabited towards greater personal autonomy seems to tap into a wider narrative of social mobility and self-determination that is much celebrated in present-day Western culture. The reading group engage with this manifestation of feminism in their discussion, but not all readers seem to align themselves with this ideology. Max's comments appear to resist the ideology of the text by interpreting Dellarobia's story as atypical; indeed, he adopts the patriarchal perspective that husbands are usually more intelligent than their wives. Max's resistant reading leads to his expression of sympathy for Cub, which is grounded partly on the fact that the character has had to endure unusual behaviour from his wife. In the course of the discussion, however, Max's reading of the text is widely rejected by the group,

3 Robert, the other male in the group, is not positioned as an authority in this instance. This is possibly because Robert has not explicitly offered a gendered reading of the novel.

with the other readers aligning themselves to the feminist ideology of the novel and to a "commonsense" anti-sexism – the latter of which shares similarities with the anti-racism discourse identified by Benwell (2012).

5 Conclusion

This article has examined how representations of real life and fictional worlds are merged and shifted between in the talk produced in literary reading groups. We have taken a socio-cognitive approach to reading group talk, combining analytical methods from discourse analysis and cognitive stylistics in order to discuss the structural, representational and referential aspects of the interactions. We have argued that utterances in reading group talk perform both conceptual and social action: constructing representations which are contingent upon and embedded within the interpersonal context of the discussion. Our analysis has shown that readers in these groups move between discussions of the real world and the fictional world to perform various functions: to claim expertise, to engage in play, and to state (and then backtrack from) controversial opinions. Regarding the latter function, it seems that orienting claims in relation to a literary work rather than real life can be interactionally 'safer' for readers, and less likely to provoke disagreement. This may go some way in accounting for the popularity of reading groups as sites of cultural debate, as members of such groups are afforded the space to discuss difficult issues and disclose aspects of their identity in a relatively indirect way, through the filter of talking about books. On a related point, it is also clear that in reading group discourse there is a tendency to avoid face-threatening disagreement, so although the rest of the group are keen to stress that Max is wrong in his views on gender norms, they are also ready to help him save face by positioning him as an authoritative voice on masculine identity.

As our analysis has shown, literary works are often understood through the application of real-world knowledge, and one implication of this assertion is that understandings of real-world issues have the potential to be updated by engagement with (and discussion of) literary texts in these groups. This notion of knowledge operating as a feedback loop within the groups, with readers bringing ideas about a text along to meetings, sharing these thoughts, and updating their beliefs in light of the group discussion is worthy of further study.

Appendix 1 Transcription key

Transcript feature	Key
(.)	brief pause – less than 0.5 s
(0.5)	timed pause
=	latching – no pause between speakers' turns
[yeah	simultaneous speech
[yeah	
EXACtly	speaker places emphasis on word or phrase
>yes<	speaker speeds-up
<no>	speaker slows down
:::	drawn-out sound
Xxxxxx	inaudible speech
((laughter))	paralinguistic feature, nonverbal communication feature, or transcriber's note

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