

# **Bibliomemoir: Reading Children's Literature by Muneebah Osman**

## **Abstract**

The bibliomemoir is not a well-known genre in terms of autobiographical writing and the concept of a bibliomemoir of childhood reading is even less explored. The purpose of this long research essay is to bring to attention the importance of writing about the experiences of reading children's literature. Using Francis Spufford's memoir, *The Child that Books Built*, I will reveal the manner in which reading children's literature shapes the understanding a child has of their world and how it influences them later in life. As I analyse Spufford's personal experiences with reading, I will explore my own, and write my own narrative of childhood reading. Writing my own narrative will open a discussion into the topic in a local context and it may get those who read it to think about their childhood reading. I will also be discussing the relation between reading experience and the spaces in which we read. As I discuss the relevance of children's literature I will also be exploring its evolution over several centuries, while relating it in its past forms to what it has become now. I will do this by referring to books that detail the

history of reading and literature such as *Children's Literature A Reader's History, From Aesop to Harry Potter* by Seth Lerer and *A History of Reading* by Alberto Manguel. Using these texts and my own reading experience, I intend to bring attention to the bibliomemoir of childhood reading and the idea that children's literature is something we need to focus on more as the reading habits we develop when we are young shape the manner in which we see the world and will affect us later in life.

Francis Spufford's memoir, *The Child that Books Built*, takes the reader on a journey through the books that defined his childhood. Memoirs have been written about the authors' reading experience but generally these bibliomemoirs focus on the books that authors read as adults. Spufford discusses his reading habits during childhood making this memoir a unique entry into the field of the bibliomemoir. What is so important about this text is the attention it draws to the reading habits of a young child. I believe that childhood reading is essential and that children's literature is as worthy of in-depth study as other literary genres. Spufford's memoir shows the amount of influence reading has on the development of the child. Besides the first introductory chapter, Spufford's memoir is divided into

four parts; each one focused on a different part of his personal reading experience as he grew up.

Spufford has the reader listen to his confessions before taking them through the forest, to the island, through the town, and to the final part of his childhood, which in the memoir ends at his nineteenth year, to the hole. One may question why he chooses this manner of structuring the memoir; why not chart it by the age he was when he read certain books instead? Spufford sorts the books he read in his youth into categories that take into account what the stories have in common. I believe that sorting the books in this manner allowed him to emphasise the importance of the symbolic function of the stories he mentions specifically. These stories carry different meaning to him, and he encountered them at different times in his life. The memoir contains moments of not only reflection but also psychoanalysis in which Spufford analyses the effects of books and stories on him, and on child readers as a whole. Spufford explores the various consequences of reading widely from a young age. This essay will focus on the first two chapters of the memoir; as they discuss his addiction to reading, the reasons why he wrote the memoir, and his ideas of where readers find themselves early in their development. Spufford's choice to present reading as an addiction invites the reader to think of the true value of reading.

This memoir appeals to those who love to read; the conversation that Spufford engages in with the reader encourages them to reflect on their early reading habits. As such, I found myself drawn into his words, as well as inspired to reflect on my own reading experiences, and to think about the influence what I read as a child had on my perspective, as well as how it influenced the reading habits I have developed now.

*The Child that Books Built* is a memoir; Spufford has taken a specific period from his life and reflected on it, raising questions about the value of his childhood reading. The autobiography is considered to be a genre of “writing by the self” (Roberts 52). This means the autobiography is a personal work, in which the author writes about their own life and experiences<sup>1</sup>. An offshoot of the autobiography, the memoir is not a new concept and has been in use for many years. The memoir is a smaller version of the autobiography as it isolates a specific part of the author’s life that they would like to share. Spufford chooses to engage in a discussion of the books he read as a child; it is this decision that fits the memoir into a smaller subgenre of the autobiography. This is what is called the bibliomemoir, “a book about reading

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<sup>1</sup> For more on autobiography and memoir see the chapter “The Autobiographical Pact” in *On Autobiography* by Phillipe Lejeune, and *Memoir: An Introduction* by G. Thomas Couser.

books” (Sullivan)<sup>2</sup>. The trend among the authors who write the bibliomemoir, however, is to write about the books they read as adults or to talk about the meaning a specific book has to them, as is the case with Rebecca Mead’s *My Life in Middlemarch*. What sets Spufford’s bibliomemoir apart are the books he discusses. There are few examples of bibliomemoir and even fewer of those cover the books authors have read as children.

One of the few examples of a memoir that covers childhood reading is Alice Ozma’s *The Reading Promise*; however, Ozma herself does not consider the memoir to be about books, and she sees it as a book about her family, which makes her addition to the genre quite different to Spufford’s. In a local context I could find no examples of books specifically about childhood reading. In Chris Van Wyk’s autobiography *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, there is some mention of reading as a child but not much else is said about it, as childhood reading is not the focus of the autobiography. Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Moving the Centre* contains a chapter entitled “Biggles, Mau Mau and I”, in which he discusses the impact of the books he read, specifically focusing on a set of adventure stories he read as a teenager, and

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<sup>2</sup> For further information on the bibliomemoir see full article. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, “Turning Pages: What’s the point of bibliomemoirs?”

how alienated he felt from the books. His discussion differs greatly from Spufford's, who speaks of the connection he could find with the characters in the books he read. The relatability of Spufford's memoir leads to me question why there is not a greater presence of bibliomemoir that focuses on childhood reading. Spufford wrote this bibliomemoir because he wanted to know why he read with what he calls such a "frantic appetite"; words that made me realise how much he needed fiction by making it sound like someone who has been starving, and, in a way, he has, for both knowledge and escape. It also left me questioning why I read the way I did as a child, as I would feel bereft if we did not make it to the library often enough to get new books. I know that there are many other readers in the world who have been reading since they were children, why have they not written their own stories? I am interested in this not only in the global context, but in the local one as well. Unlike Spufford, I grew up reading contemporary books set in other places, leading to me feeling alienated from the content as I have never seen the places mentioned first-hand. I only encountered a locally set book in the set works at school or if I read novels written in Afrikaans. There are more children's and young adult literature set locally now but there are few authors who speak of the impact their childhood reading had on them.

Children's literature has experienced a radical change since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Early children's stories had a discernible message, and it was quite dark, as they prepared children to face the reality of an early death; this is according to Gillian Avery and Margaret Kinnel in their chapter of Peter Hunt's edited volume, *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History*. It took some time for children's stories to become more religiously focused; this is because fiction was not considered an acceptable method to teach religion (48). An early collection of children's stories that was published in the early 1800's was called *March's Library of Instruction and Amusement* (Avery and Kinnel 47). The placement of instruction before amusement in the title is telling as to which was more important about the stories and their intended purpose for the readers. These stories were written for the children as lessons in how to behave and shaped their perception of life in a manner that is far removed from how they read today. While education and lessons are still a priority, there is not as didactic a tone in recent tales written for children<sup>3</sup>. Spufford chose to base his memoir on childhood reading because of the possibilities inherent in the stories, whether they are old or new. The child reading a book is exposed to words that are "infinitely

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<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Book of Children's Stories* by Jan Mark displays the shift in writing for children through a collection of stories for children from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup>.

inflectable in tone and intent” (22). The idea here is that children are able to attach their own significance to a story; they may recognise the familiar and respond to it in different ways. Context is also important in terms of children’s literature. A child born in the last decade may read a story that was written in the 1950s and would not be able to fully identify with it beyond thinking of the setting as something one would only read in a book because of the changes that have occurred since then. Spufford refers to a story from his childhood which was imminently recognisable because what was present in that story was a part of his daily life. As he says, “Time has carried away the possibility of recognising the baker, the milkman and the newspaper boy” (48). Contemporary readers will not recognise these people though they were common in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Spufford states that time has ‘carried’ them away; displaying the influence the passing of time has on the fictional tale. It is this constant evolution and the manner in which young readers respond to it that fascinates both Spufford and me. It is at this point that I would like to go into the first two chapters of *The Child that Books Built* to illustrate the effects reading from a young age had on Spufford as well as what I learned about my own early reading experiences.



In the first chapter of *The Child that Books Built*, entitled “Confessions of an English Fiction Eater”, Spufford engages in an interesting discussion about what reading means to him and his addiction to the activity. Unlike the other four chapters, the name of this first one does not refer to a place or a specific theme that fits a number of the stories and books he read as a child. The title of this chapter is a play on the Thomas de Quincey essay, “Confessions of an English Opium Eater”, in which de Quincey writes about his addiction to opium. The title has many connotations; not only is Spufford an addict, he uses this first chapter as a platform to discuss his addiction, and presents the reader with his confessions. I would like to look first at the concept of the Confession. Why would Spufford choose to write this first chapter as a confession of what he calls an addiction? In *The Western Canon* literary critic Harold Bloom put together a compendium of literature he believes is necessary for the contemporary reader. On this list is Saint Augustine’s autobiography, which is simply titled *Confessions*. In the case of Saint Augustine the genre of the confession served as a method of repentance, to forgive himself of the crimes of his youth and to emphasise the importance of his conversion to Christianity (McCabe 451). The concept of the religious confession lies in the premise that by speaking one’s sins and repenting for them, the person will receive forgiveness. While this is easily applied to

Saint Augustine and De Quincey's confessions, should it be applied to Spufford's? Spufford's confessions reveal that he found salvation in reading, similar to the way in which Saint Augustine found it in religion; however, the difference lies in the fact that Spufford's approach to reading is not religious. While Spufford is not trying to replace religious salvation with reading I would say he has found a different method of salvation.

What Spufford does with this chapter is very interesting because he puts an addiction to fiction on the same level as being addicted to a narcotic, an act that drove de Quincey to repent in a public manner. However, Spufford does not see his addiction as one that needs repenting as it has more cultural value than other addictions; he makes this addiction acceptable. More than once in the memoir Spufford mentions that fiction saved him; it gave him a coping mechanism to deal with the world. These two contrasting methods of referring to reading makes it seem as though the practice is, to Spufford, both his sin and his salvation. Spufford brings up the current form of the literary revelation in, "The promise of revelation has splintered, and the splinters have fallen separately, without losing all of their original brightness. One smithereen (at least) has glimmered in the novel" (8). Spufford refers to the promise of revelation, which refers to the primary meaning of it being religious, a meaning that has

changed over the centuries which can be taken from the word ‘splintered’. While the original purpose of revelation may have broken the splinters Spufford refers to have become part of the novel. The novel offers Spufford a different form of revelation, one that he finds himself addicted to, the question is why is this revelation so addictive, not only to Spufford but to all avid readers.

Spufford’s confession is about his reading addiction. He calls himself a fiction eater and makes a clear statement about his situation, “I need fiction. I’m an addict” (Spufford 5). These words would resonate with anyone who reads voraciously. As Spufford goes on to detail his nightly routine, in which he spends up to half an hour looking for a book to read while he brushes his teeth, the reader is shown the depth of his need for fiction. Reading is not considered a bad trait; readers are appreciated because the activity does not have negative side effects. In terms of addiction to an activity, reading has an advantage over other entertainment mediums. As Spufford states, “The medium *I’m* wrapped in scores me a cultural point. I don’t watch daytime soap operas, I’m bookish: I have the dignity of high culture, although in fact I find the frictionless surface of genre fiction easier food for my compulsion” (7). Spufford’s addiction gives him the dignity that an addiction to harmful substances or the

lower regarded forms of entertainment takes away from the addict. Spufford states his habit scores him a “cultural point”, bringing into awareness the manner in which society judges people for their addictions. Here Spufford advocates an addiction to reading as acceptable, while also qualifying that he prefers to read genre fiction, which is not always held in high regard. He calls his reading a ‘compulsion’, and it is clear from his use of the word ‘bookish’ that the compulsion is not one he tries to resist. Spufford, in his confessions, presents a different view of those obsessed with reading.

In a world so full of fiction, the reader becomes spoiled for choice, however, on the negative end of the spectrum we have the problem of there being too much to choose from. As Spufford describes, “The more you see a bookshop how I tend to, as a chemist’s dispensing an almost universal range of mood-altering substances, each slightly different from the next, the more essentially interchangeable books seem. The promise of reading recedes” (6). Spufford makes explicit links between books and drugs as he refers to them as a universal range of mood-altering substances however; there is a problem with sheer volume of fiction that the reader encounters. This would be one of the ramifications of overindulging the need for books, they soon become a blur, of faces and characters that readers

may forget or simply see too much of. Despite feeling this way, Spufford cannot give up on his need for fiction because it has become an ingrained part of him; it is a habit he has nurtured since he was a young boy and has been influencing the way he sees the world. Spufford uses the teachings of the Enlightenment period in his discussion of why fiction, rather than non-fiction, is his preferred form of novel:

The dominant sensation of reading was excited delight as books did for us on the scale of our childhoods what the propagandists of the Enlightenment promised that all books could do for everyone, everywhere. They freed us from the limitations of our own circumstances (10).

To Spufford the value of books came from the new experiences the reader gained from reading them. Reading has enormous emotional significance as can be seen in Spufford's use of the words "excited delight". According to Spufford, Enlightenment thinkers saw books as liberation; this can be taken from his stating "they freed us from the limitations". Spufford calls the theorists of the Enlightenment era 'propagandists' in their views on books. Once again, he uses a term that is customarily used in a negative manner to describe what most would see as a positive

concept; as he shares their belief. According to Spufford, their propaganda was that books would free people and that is exactly what they do for him. It is in this concept that Spufford finds the value of reading, and reading fiction specifically. The addictive quality of fiction is in its ability to reveal new worlds and offer new perspectives to the reader; it shows that our reality is only a small part in a large, unexplored world. The idea of an endless stream of knowledge, of unexplored places, is where Spufford finds the value in reading fiction. As a reader myself, I am always eager to explore new places in the pages of a book. The ability of fiction to lift the reader from their reality into a new space fascinates me and is what keeps me reading.

As Spufford recounts the consequences of his addiction it provides contrast to the manner in which de Quincey speaks of his opium addiction. As Damian Walford Davies points out in his essay on de Quincey's work, there were pains and pleasures to his experience with opium (269). Spufford's memoir is as much in conversation with the reader as "Confessions of an English Opium Eater" was but the difference between them is that where de Quincey has to seek understanding from many of his readers about his addiction, Spufford's memoir would have less of a problem getting readers to understand his situation. It is clear that Spufford hopes that a reader will recognise what he

discusses as he addresses the reader saying, “If you were a reading child in the sixties or the seventies” (19). Spufford has an audience in mind for the memoir; he imagines other people who read the same stories as children will see the memoir. In writing my own bibliomemoir, I would imagine the people who would read it would be ones that grew up in the same generation, readers whose first experience may have been J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series,<sup>4</sup> or *His Dark Materials* by Phillip Pullman. Contemporary readers have a diverse selection of children’s literature to choose from as they have both the classics of Spufford’s generation, as well as those from my own. Many of the people who would read the memoir would be readers themselves and would be able to engage with his writing as they agree and disagree with his opinions and experiences. Besides using the title, Spufford also refers to de Quincey’s work as he says that de Quincey does not mention precisely why he used laudanum, just that he needed to fill a gap and opium was the perfect filler. Taking inspiration from this situation Spufford looks at the gap in his own life that needed to be filled that led to his own addiction. Due his younger sister’s illness as a young

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<sup>4</sup> More than once I have come across people whose first reading experience was *Harry Potter* and this led to their interest in reading, I would like to further explore the phenomenon that is the *Harry Potter* series in terms of children’s literature and fantasy in later work.

boy Spufford had to find something to allow him to turn a blind eye to the tumultuous feelings that it raised. In his honest revelation of how he wished his sister was elsewhere, where he did not have to constantly see her and face the negativity of his feelings towards her, Spufford shows the desperation he felt as a child faced with this kind of situation. He needed an escape and he found his escape in fiction as he says,

I learned to pump up the artificial realities of fiction from page to mind at a pressure that equalised with the pressure of the world, so that (in theory) the moment I actually lived in could never fill me completely, whatever was happening (17).

Spufford makes use of a mechanical metaphor in his effort to explain how he used reading to escape reality. His use of “pump up the artificial realities” emphasises the intensity with which he read. He speaks of the “pressure of the world” and that by increasing the pressure of his reading he could make them equal, so that the realities of the world no longer dominated. Reading has often been called an escape, many people read when they need to turn away from their responsibilities for a few hours and relax. Using reading as a manner of escape is not all it gives Spufford or anyone else who indulges in the habit. What we read



makes us reflect on our lives and what happens in it. We do not only seek escape when we read, we read because we want that distance, that new perspective a work of fiction offers us, through what we read we may learn about ourselves and the world around us.

I could identify with much of what I read in Spufford's memoir; I recognise many of his actions as a reader within my own behaviour. Spufford begins the first chapter of the memoir with what his mother called, "a reading silence" (1). The special silence that is created when we read is not easily identified by the reader but rather by the people around us. What I remember about reading, what I still feel today, is the peace of being in a quiet room with nothing but my book to give my attention to; the kind of stillness that can be felt in the air. The stillness that comes from reading a book is different kind of stillness than is attached to other practices that encourage a sense of concentration and reflection. When I pray, I encounter a type of stillness as well, but it feels different from the stillness that I feel when I read a novel. The stillness of prayer brings a different sort of peace than reading does, though I value them both. Reading also gives me a sense of privacy. I can, and have, been utterly alone in a room full of people because I had a book in my hands. For those minutes I spent lost in whatever story I was

reading I was completely alone, and that was the way I wanted it. Of the many things that books have given me, I treasure knowledge the most. I have always had a deep desire to learn, and I found that as I read, as I devoured one book after another I always learned something new. I may not have been many places in the world yet, but through books I have seen so much of the world that does exist, as well as places that only exist in authors wildly entertaining imaginations. Spufford asks, “Can you be addicted to discovery? If you were would it be a problem?” (10). As far as addictions go, I believe there are many worse substances to be addicted to. Being an addict of English fiction, I enjoyed travelling through the complex paths of Spufford’s childhood reading as it invoked memories of my own.

Reading Spufford’s memoir inspired me in a way only certain books ever have. I treasure the stories of my childhood and the fact that I spent a large amount of it reading is important to me because I know I would not be the person I am today if not for the habit I cultivated as a young girl. I cannot take all the credit for the person I have become though. When I was only one year old, my mother gave me the greatest gift she possibly could have; she took a library card in my name. If it is possible that a fondness for reading could be hereditary, then my mother is the

source of my personal obsession with books. She read to me when I was young, so that by the time I entered school I was able to read and write. I doubt she realised then how much I would grow to love stories and books, because she did the same with my two older brothers and neither of them picked up the habit to the extent I did. Perhaps it was because I needed the sense of discovery that came with reading a new book. I am a few years younger than my brothers and the only girl in the house. While they were free to go off and play with friends, I was somewhat more protected, with very few female friends of the same age in the neighbourhood. I never felt any lack though, and rarely felt lonely as school gave me the necessary interaction with other children and I was able to find all the companionship I needed in books. I believe this is what led to me becoming such an avid reader; though I gained freedom as I grew I always felt the most comfortable between the pages of a book where I could find endless adventure.

Most of the time reading is a solitary experience, Spufford's reading allowed him to escape his family and be alone, I read because I was alone and it gave me the companionship I wanted without having to approach new people (much to my parents' exasperation I was a painfully shy child). However, there are times when reading is not solitary, when people read together

they build a bond. The love of reading is something my mother and I have in common even though we may not enjoy reading the same books. It has become a favoured gift for us to buy family and friends that have babies and small children as we would like them to experience the same joy that comes from sharing a story. To me, reading is a bonding experience. This does not mean I disagree with Spufford's focus on the solitary reader, he wrote about his experiences reading as a child most of which was solitary just as mine was, but I did not start alone as he did. My mother read to me and taught me how to read, which is why, I believe that through the activity people form lasting bonds as they travel through a story together. Being read to has its own significance as shown in Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading*,

The ceremony of being read to no doubt deprives the listener of some of the freedom inherent in the act of reading – choosing a tone, stressing a point, returning to a best-loved passage – but also gives the versatile text a respectable identity, a sense of unity in time and an existence in space that it seldom has in the capricious hands of a solitary reader (123).

The solitary reader has the ‘freedom’ of deciding how they want to interpret the story or book they are reading, when you listen to someone else telling the story it is their voice that gives the story its tone. While this may not be ideal for all readers, there is something special about listening to way someone else reads a story and the enjoyment that is found in the tale is shared between those who read and those who listen. While the ritual of reading and being read to have implications for both the reader and the listener, it also creates a bubble of privacy and intimacy for those involved in the act. I use the word “ritual” because of the feeling it may invoke between those participating in the act. Stories were not always read from books; they have a rich history of oral tradition as they were passed from person to person through speech long before they were written down.

The second chapter of the bibliomemoir takes the reader to the first of Spufford’s literary settings; it is in this chapter that he speaks of his earliest reading experiences. He has a range of stories which he relates to the forest. They were home to wild creatures, kings, knights, young boys and girls, and the various other characters encountered in the wild literary forest. Spufford does not only conceptualise the forest as one of the first places in which readers find themselves but also discusses the psychoanalytical significance of this story setting. It is interesting

to note how Spufford sorts the stories that defined part of his childhood into separate spaces; giving totally unrelated stories a common thread, thereby neatly sorting a large and integral part of his childhood into a decipherable, symbolic path.

As Spufford once mapped out the Keele forest he spent time in as a child, so he maps the forest full of fictional characters whose stories placed them there. Though all these characters are in the same place in the reader's imagination, they never meet. As Spufford states, "But each travelled separately, because it was the nature of the forest that you were alone in it. It was the place in which by definition you had no companions, and no resources except your own uncertain self" (25). Taking into account Spufford stating that it was 'the nature of the forest' for the reader to be alone in it, evidently the forest acts as a space of isolation both in the fictional landscape as well as for the reader who travels through it. His emphasis on the lack of companions on this journey further intensifies the feeling of isolation. What is most important to note in this quote is Spufford's interest in the 'uncertain self'. The forest is a disorienting place to navigate on your own and this is compounded by the youth of the traveller and their own lack of confidence in their abilities. At this point in their lives the young reader is still learning about himself or herself, but at the beginning of their journey they are

not certain as to the path they will take. Many of the fictional characters that embark on journeys through the forest do so alone; Spufford's argument is that the reader does as well. Though the child reader may encounter these characters in the forest they are essentially alone, with only themselves to rely on to guide them through the wilderness. By cutting the child off from outside influences, making them rely solely on themselves, the child changes during the journey. They emerge from the forest as different individuals, because the solitary adventure they undergo allows the reader to explore themselves. The early stories of lost children, wild creatures and new discoveries are the building blocks of the young reader's personality. As Spufford states, "It is the place a baby is, before the developing mind has built up a model of things it can rely on. It is the place we are before structure" (33). This idea firmly secures the reader to the literary landscape; it supports Spufford's theory that the forest is the first place people find themselves. Before the reader becomes self-aware and realises all the implications of the world around he or she is lost in the forest, and as they grow and learn to put names to people, objects and places, slowly they will begin to develop their sense of self and their environment. As the child grows and learns of their external surroundings, through stories and books they make sense of their internal forests.

The forest is not only the place where the reader begins but also where they return to when their reality becomes unrecognisable. Spufford states that Bruno Bettelheim became a pioneer in the 1970's for viewing stories as therapeutic (31). Spufford has taken an interest in Bettelheim's work as he takes a psychoanalytic approach to the forest. Bettelheim's work looks at the forest as a symbol of the unconscious. Spufford uses this idea as can be seen in,

It is the minds necessary wilderness. It is entwined because its separate growths have never been distinguished or uttered. It is dark because the fears and desires that grow here have not been admitted to the light of awareness (30).

The phrase "necessary wildness" refers to the unknown and untraceable pathways of the subconscious. Spufford lends this essential characteristic of the forest, its wildness, to his description of the inner workings of our minds. There are certain implications to Spufford's use of the word "necessary". There have been many attempts to understand the subconscious and this why I believe Spufford categorises the wildness by claiming it is "necessary". Our subconscious contains our innermost thoughts and wishes that we are not sure about as we can see by



Spufford's statement that they have not been "admitted to the light of awareness". Why this is important to Spufford's narrative of the forest is because fiction may be used as a way of allowing us to access and better understand the workings of our subconscious. There are two different manners to approach the internal forest. The Freudian approach towards the literary forest emphasises the individual; it is the earlier mentioned solitary exploration of the forest and the self. It has been accepted that reading is a method of dealing with the subconscious. The other perspective Spufford looks at is Jung's collective unconscious, which provides what Spufford refers to as a "shared forest" (31). The collective unconscious is made up of "*primordial thought-feelings*, which are shared with all mankind"<sup>5</sup>. The use of the word primordial means that these "thought-feelings" are a basic part of the individual. Applying this idea to fiction means that stories will end up in the same forest. Spufford's preferred reading of the subconscious would be the Freudian perspective as it favours the individual journey into the subconscious forest. What readers learn about themselves as they unravel their subconscious thoughts are private emotions that should be explored in isolation. However, readers do not

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<sup>5</sup> According to Maurice Nicoll found in Summaries of Articles, *The Philosophical Review*.

first encounter stories on their own, they are often introduced to them through the voice of someone else.

Spufford places emphasis on the fact that it is not the written word that is the child's introduction to stories but the spoken word. The adult voice that tells the child the story is as important as the details contained within the story, as they are repeated for the child (46). According to Spufford a child's mind has set patterns and these patterns must be followed for all to be right with their world. Though Spufford's focus in the memoir lies mainly in discussing reading as a solitary activity, here he draws the reader's attention to the act of reading to someone else. Although he does not spend much time on the importance of the spoken story, I believe there is deep significance to the act, as I have stated in the earlier discussion of my reading experience. Spufford's focus with this section lies more with the child becoming familiar with the patterns that exist in stories and how they begin to orient themselves and their world within the set pattern that they are given in fictional stories. Parents telling stories to their children perpetuate the long history of oral tradition that is part and parcel of the child's first contact with fictional tales. The repetition of a story has the effect of settling the child in their environment but also has a secondary effect in

the simple pleasure that is taken from the act. Manguel succinctly conveys this experience in,

But most of the time I simply enjoyed the luxurious sensation of being carried away by the words, and felt, in a very physical sense, that I was actually travelling somewhere wonderfully remote, to a place that I hardly dared glimpse on the secret last page of the book (110).

This personal response to being read to delivers a vivid picture of the benefits of the act. For the listener being read to does not stop them from experiencing a similar sort of emotional journey they would experience when they read themselves. Listening to a story being told means that the listener can relax and relinquish the responsibility of the act to someone else.

The act of reading, whether it is solitary or between two or more people reading aloud to each other, has the ability to connect people on a large scale. I have made friends based on an immediate connection because we love to read and our tastes are similar. Recently I have heard about gatherings called ‘reading parties’ in which the attendees of these parties bring something to read with them and spend an hour or two in the same place,

reading together, not talking to each other, and then leave or stay after to talk to other people that attended the party. What fascinated me about this trend is the sense of togetherness that can grow in a room full of strangers who do not speak to each other but share the same passion for a good book<sup>6</sup>. Benedict Andersen has a theory of the concept of nationality which he calls the “Imagined Community”. As a definition Andersen offers an “Imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (49). Andersen’s argument is that the concept of the nation is an imagined relationship shared by the population of the nation. It is imagined because the laws and societal constructs that form the nation are not real, they are an agreed upon set of rules created by the people who live in that nation. Andersen refers to the concept of the nation as imagined because, “The members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (49). While Andersen’s description is used to illuminate why the idea of the nation is imagined I believe it can also be applied to the reading community. Akin to the manner in which the single member of the nation may feel connected to

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<sup>6</sup> For full article see DenHoed, Andrea. *The New Yorker*, “Reader’s Night Out”.

his or her fellow countrymen; the reader may also share a similar kind of rapport with others who read. However, the connection that exists between readers is not as blatant as the connection between countrymen. An imagined community of readers relies on a subtler application of the theory. The community of readers is wide and is not bound to the borders that limit countries; there is no confined, physical space for the community of readers to exist. The reading parties create small environments in which readers gather; making readers aware they are part of this community while also affirming the idea that there is a greater community of readers beyond that gathering. Reading has become, among those who love to read, a favoured way to escape the often-trying circumstances of daily life and these gatherings gives them the space to indulge in the act. Though we may not read in the same way, or for the same meaning the theoretical forest exists for all readers.

One of the first genres in storytelling that children are introduced to is the fairy tale. These stories are the ones that are repeated by parents and caregivers; the details of the stories rarely change as they are stories that have been passed down through generations. The fairy tale is familiar to everyone, even those who do not read. Fairy tales are an important part of the forest, many fairy tales have a forest within them, in which the

characters find friends, or face trials, and grow as they pass through it. What was most interesting about Spufford's discussion of the fairy tale is his declaration that, "In fairy tales, famously, character is destiny. Who the personages are, and what happens to them, are completely inseparable" (50). Through fairy tales, children are introduced to protagonists that are pure and good and are rewarded for their behaviour, or for learning from their mistakes. The abused young woman triumphs over her morally corrupt family and attains her happily ever after, the less than honest puppet learns his lesson and gets his dearest wish granted. The common theme is that the characters are rewarded for being good. Some fairy tales come across as didactic because of the amount of emphasis that is placed on the actions of the characters. Fairy tales were not originally stories for children; they descend from folk tales and were passed down orally, changing subtly as time went on. According to Seth Lerer<sup>7</sup>, these stories were popular for courtiers as they taught "ideal behaviour" (210). After the writings of Charles Perrault (whose versions of Cinderella and Little Red Riding Hood readers recognise today) fairy tales spread from salons and courts to find their place in common households as well. The appearance of fairy tales occurred early and in the middle of

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<sup>7</sup> In *Children's Literature A Reader's History, From Aesop to Harry Potter*

the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The evolution of the fairy tale from a tale to educate adults to ones meant for children occurred just before the first novel written specifically for children. I find that fairy tales had a secondary effect on both Spufford and myself, it acted as a gateway into another genre of fiction; Fantasy.

The fantasy novel takes the reader on a greater journey than the realist novel. Authors create amazing new worlds and take readers to places they can only imagine. The first novel Spufford remembers reading is Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and he refers to Tolkien's *On Fairy Tales* in his discussion about fantasy. Tolkien describes the power of the author as he states, "The human mind, endowed with the power of generalisation and abstraction, sees not only *green-grass*, discriminating it from other things (and finding it fair to look upon), but sees that it is *green* as well as being *grass*" (122). Tolkien shows how people picture their world from what they see around them, as he says "discriminating it from other things". We, as people, place labels and significance to our surroundings thus allowing us to see the grass as well as its colour. Authors have the ability to create worlds that appear as vibrantly to the reader as the green grass. The author's ability to create new worlds that remove the reader from the real world is what draws Spufford to them so strongly. Spufford describes his favourite novels as those that did not

exist in this world. Spufford states, “I wanted there to be the chance to pass through a portal, and by doing so to pass from rusty reality with its scaffolding of facts and events into the freedom of story” (85). The metaphor Spufford uses to describe the transition from the real world to the world of fantasy can be applied to many of the stories that children read. The metaphor can also be applied to my own shift from reading fairy tales into the world of fantasy novels. I was fond of fairy tales as a child because they represented a new world that was unfamiliar and exciting. Fairy tales opened the door for me into the world of fantasy. The first fantasy novel I owned and read was Phillip Pullman’s *Northern Lights*, which I bought to read on the plane on a trip to India I took with my parents when I was 12. *Northern Lights* itself is filled with images of portals and doors, as I followed Lyra and her companion Pan; I discovered new places and people with them. However, that was my first time on a plane and I found I could not concentrate on my novel, though I was looking forward to reading it before. Once we were in India, however, there were times when we were not out sightseeing or visiting acquaintances of my parents, that we stayed in the flat of a family friend, and in that room was something I had always imagined curling up on to read, a window seat. It was there that I was finally able to lose myself in the book I had brought with me. Physically, I was further away



from home than I had ever been before; mentally, I was even further away. Sitting in the window seat of a flat many storeys above the busy streets of Mumbai, my spirit was in the London of an Earth that does not exist. This is the power of the fantasy novel and why it holds such attractiveness to me. Fiction has the power to not only change the surroundings of the reader but also to change the manner in which the reader thinks.

Spufford's narrative shows that there are numerous benefits to childhood reading. By further exploring the bibliomemoir of his childhood reading it becomes clear that there are lasting effects for the reader when they have been reading since childhood. The major evolution that children's literature has undergone has resulted in stories and novels that become a part of the reader's life. Spufford's examination of why he read and what it gave him is important and is something more readers should examine. Childhood reading and children's literature is a subject that deserves closer attention, in both the global and local context. Fiction has an ability to connect people, to heal them, and to provide them with an escape from their reality. We, as readers, experience this ability every day, it is time we realised its true importance.

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