

**CFP:** "Addressing Readers"

**Venue:** University Paul-Valéry Montpellier III

**Date:** 28-29 November 2019

**Research lab:** EMMA, Etudes Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone

**Conveners:** Virginie Iché & Sandrine Sorlin

**Website:** <https://addressingreaders.wordpress.com/>



READER, I married him. A quiet wedding we had: he and I, the parson and

## Addressing Readers

### The Pragmatics of Communication from the First Printed Novels in English to 20<sup>th</sup>-and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Digital Fiction

This conference intends to focus on the specific relationship authors and/or narrators entertain with their readers in fictional works from the first novels written in English in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to 21<sup>st</sup>-century digital fictions. It is predicated on the idea that fiction is a form of communicative act in the vein of Roger Sell's works in literary pragmatics (Sell 1991, 2000, 2011) or James Phelan's (2011: 56, 2017) conception of literature as a "communicative event," that is "a rhetorical action in which an author addresses an audience for some purpose(s)."

The first English 'novel' forms of the 18<sup>th</sup> century seem to have adopted the conversational mode, with recurrent direct addresses to the readers, meant to lead them through the narrative, to convince them of the (in)authenticity of the stories or to coax them into sharing the authors'/ narrators' ethical judgment. 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels still feature many instances of intervening narrators directly addressing the reader, Brontë's Jane Eyre's cue "Reader, I married him" being the most famous of the narrator's felt necessity to confide in the reader at key points of the novel. But as Warhol (1989) indicates, other British and American woman writers (such as Elizabeth Gaskell, Harriet Beecher Stowe, or George Eliot) longed to engage their readers' sympathy for the cause of American slaves, working-class poor in Manchester, or middle-class rural folk in England, directly urging them to identify with the real-life characters they were describing. The attempt at persuading can go the other way round with readers trying to deter the authors of serial narratives (such as Dickens or Thackeray) from killing a character for instance (sparing little Nell is a famous plea addressed to the author of *The Old Curiosity Shop*). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the conversational mode with the reader for whom the piece of work is designed seems to have been dropped, or at least to have persisted in much more concealed ways, as modernist works do not much feature intrusive narrators guiding readers through the narratives.

The primary research questions this conference aims to tackle are the following: is what appears as a progressive disappearance of the explicit communicative framework a reality from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century in fiction (written in English)? If so, how to account for the phenomenon? Are there aesthetic and stylistic reasons? Different tastes and approaches to the novel? Have the more and more sophisticated techniques of thought (re)presentation that have been used to reflect characters' deeply intimate thoughts in (post)modernist fiction for instance, inevitably eclipsed the need to communicate with the reader through a direct channel? Has the reader been at some point (like the author) "refined out of existence" to favour immersion in the story-world and to bring language

and/or characters to the front scene? Yet, even in the most language-oriented novel, addresses to the reader are not absent: in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce seems to have been keen on leaving the channel of communication open with his readers (Cahalan 1995). Is, as Warhol (1986) intimates, the disapproved “sentimentalism” of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century “engaging” (rather than “distancing” narrator responsible for its disappearance in literature? Or does it simply reflect one specific historical and ideological moment, direct address in fiction being then the only public forum possible for women to speak “directly, personally, and influentially”?

However, from the 1970s onwards, addressed fiction of old seems to have re-emerged under the guise of second-person narratives (Fludernik 1993, 1994) that make the situation of address “insistent” again. This morphologically explicit address (“you”) seems to become even more “reader-engaging” in 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century digital fiction that requires some form of participation from the readers (through clicking on hyperlinks or direct input) if they want the story to go on at all (Bell 2014, 2016, Bell & Ensslin 2011, Bell et al, 2010, 2014). Examining second-person addresses in digital fiction may then shed a new light on the type of participation hoped for or required by direct addresses in earlier print fiction. Do print fiction and digital fiction use direct addresses in radically different ways? Do direct addresses in digital fiction signal to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader, already attuned to the many potentialities of digital material, that s/he can have an active role in co-constructing the story or exploiting the glitches of the digital narrative (Angello 2016) or is this type of reader participation only superficially active?

In both print and digital fictions, the reference of this “you” is purposefully confused and confusing (see Bell & Ensslin 2011, Clarkson 2005; DelConte 2003; Gibbons & Macrae 2018; Fludernik 1993, 1994, 1996; Hantzis 1988; Herman 1994; Hopkins & Perkins 1981; Kacandes 1993; Margolin 1986, 1990; Morrissette 1965; Prince 1985, 1987; Richardson 1991, 2006; Sorlin 2014, 2015, 2017) – a far cry from the clear-cut I/you dyad relationship of Henry Fielding’s novels for instance. But can’t we see in the emerging narrative form of “Twitterfiction” (Thomas 2014) for instance a return to a closer writer/reader relationship in the passionate manner of Victorian times, with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century digital reader becoming an active and indispensable participant in the writing/reading process? Yet, tweeting does allow for immediate replies to the author to a stronger, faster degree, thereby destabilising the author-reader power relationship to an unprecedented level.

These new trends in both print and digital fiction have called for new narratological models of analysis to account for this specific place allotted to addressees in fiction (Fludernik’s “homo- and heterocommunicative” categories in lieu of Genette’s homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narratives for instance or DelConte’s 2003 focus on who is listening rather than who is speaking or seeing have been instrumental in this perspective). Yet, reader-centered theories seem to have sometimes lost sight of the other partner in the communication process, the author and/or narrator. Although authorship/narratorship seems more “diffuse” in odd-pronominal narratives (especially first-person plural novels) or in cybernarration, the relationship should be thought as a joint process. In this respect, fictional interactions could be pragmatically analysed (from the more traditional to the more recent pragmatic trends, namely (im)politeness theories based on face-work in interactions for instance). Few studies have indeed convened (im)politeness to account for communication in fiction (Jucker 2016, Kizelbach 2014, 2017, McIntyre & Bousfield 2017, Simpson 1989 being exceptions) even though the author/narrator does use different speech acts to court the reader, to confide in him/her and establish an intimate bond with him/her or, on the other hand, to castigate or tease him/her (think of John Barth’s famous address in *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968): “The reader! You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it’s you I’m addressing, who else, from

inside this monstrous fiction”), which implies specific conception, consideration and negotiation of face needs and wants in the communication framework at stake in a particular fiction.

Contributions adopting a pragmatic perspective in the study of the modes of interpellation and ways of engaging the reader in fiction (both print and digital) will thus be most welcome. The following topics and questions may be approached, the list not being exhaustive:

- a diachronic approach: (R)evolution of the participation framework across centuries?
- correspondences between 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels in instalments and early forms of digital fiction?
- the reader’s actual ‘freedom’ in what seems to be ‘author-controlled’ early fictions and ‘reader-centered’ late-20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century interactive fictions?
- odd-pronominal narratives blurring the notion of *authorship/narratorship* (*we/they* narratives) and *readership* (*you* narratives) and/or crossing the frontiers between the actual and the virtual world
- direct address and gender
- (author/narrator’s and reader’s) co-construction of faces
- (im)politeness and the pragmatics of communication in fiction
- the “interpellated” (Lecerle 1999) or the “positioned” (Stockwell 2013) reader: two different things?
- (authorial/narratorial) intervention and readers’ immersion in the plot: two opposed modes?
- addresses in paratexts
- engaging narrators and readers’ responses to them in different genres (fiction for children or young adults, detective novel, ‘bad guy’ first-person narratives/crime fiction, etc.)
- the evolution of novel reading (Birke 2016)
- translation of forms of address

**Deadline for submission:** May 20 2019

**Notification of acceptance:** June 20 2019

**Proposals of around 300 words to be sent to [addressingreaders@gmail.com](mailto:addressingreaders@gmail.com)**

**Language of the conference:** English

**A selection of papers will be considered for publication.**

**Registration fees :** 60€, free for students.

#### **Guest speakers:**

**Prof. Alice Bell**

(Sheffield Hallam University, UK)

**Prof. Jean-Jacques Lecerle**

(Nanterre University, France)

**Prof Roger Sell**

(Åbo Akademi University, Finland)

#### **Advisory Board:**

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Robyn Warhol (Ohio State University, US)

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