»Because she can fly«
Readers of different ages and their (least) favourite characters in Joke van Leeuwen's *Iep!*

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What makes a fictional character someone's favourite? One of the factors scholars have explored is overlapping identity markers, for instance when boy readers favour boy characters. This article extends that discussion to age by discussing data gathered in individual interviews and focus-group conversations with 18 readers between the ages of 9 and 75. In the interviews, readers were asked about their favourite character in the children's book *Iep!* (1996) by Joke van Leeuwen. Readers up to the age of 14 all selected younger characters as their favourites, whereas older readers selected favourite characters from a wider range of age groups, including younger characters. Younger readers named distinct traits as their reason for selecting a character as their favourite, such as »Because she can fly«, whereas adult readers also cited external factors for liking a character, such as a character reminding them of someone. Regarding the characters that readers did not like, readers up to the age of 11 were unable to select a character they did not like, whereas the majority of adults found this easy. Of these unpopular characters, only a small minority were children; in the main, adult readers disliked adult characters. Interestingly, several child readers defended adult characters disliked by adult readers.

There is something alluring about a character in a work of fiction being someone's favourite. The internet features scores of articles with titles like the »Top 100 Best Book Characters of All Time« (Pennyworth 2022), »Favorite Book Characters That Parents and Their Kids Love« (Scholastic Parents Staff 2023), or »The 15 Most Loved Movie Characters Of All Time« (Graff 2016). Occasionally, these articles are based on empirical data (e.g. Schinsky 2013). Interest in favourite characters has also extended into academia, with scholars offering various analyses of why certain characters are so popular. Some claim that characters' ability to »provoke reflection« is what appeals to a large section of the populace (Vermeule 2011, p. 52). Others have focused on identification, suggesting that »identification with media characters has generally been understood to denote feelings of affinity, friendship, similarity, and liking of media characters« (Cohen 2001, p. 248). Empirical work in the area has pointed to the role of identity markers; for instance, gender differences have been identified, with one study finding that »girls chose almost as many boys for favorites as they did girls, whereas the boys showed only slight interest in girls as favorite characters« (Wilson 1943, p. 161; see also Hoffner 1996, p. 397). Other scholars have explored race in similar research (Donohue 1975, p. 159; Ellithorpe / Bleakley 2016).

In this article, I discuss an identity marker whose role in an audience's selection of their favourite character has not yet received much attention: age. More specifically, I reflect on data from semi-structured interviews and focus-group conversations with 18 readers between the ages of 9 and 75 to discuss how these readers selected and discussed their

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favourite and least favourite characters from the children's novel *Iep!* (van Leeuwen 1996, English translation *Eep!* (2012)). Before presenting the data, I first explore age and literature more broadly in order to contextualise the specific gap in academic knowledge that this article engages with, while also briefly underlining the pragmatic value of improving our understanding of the role age plays in readers' perspectives on fiction, especially in a time of rising intergenerational antagonism. Then I focus on the relevance of favourite characters in particular as a topic for exploring these broader issues.

Age and literature

My exploration of the connection between readers' ages and their favourite characters is rooted in a number of parallel discussions. First of all, reader-response scholars have been interested in the role age plays in readers' engagement with literature since reader-response research emerged as a distinct field. Louise Rosenblatt's observation that »the Antony and Cleopatra read at fifteen is not the same work we evoke at thirty« (1960, p. 305) is still echoed in recent work, such as Allison Waller's comment that »[a]s a reader ages, his or her life is populated by [...] literary and non-literary events that inflect reading response« (2019, p. 25). To study how age impacts the literary experience, Joseph Appleyard proposed that we explore a »developmental view of reading,« which »suggests that the debate about meaning is not only a debate about the text or about semiotic systems and authorial strategies encoded in the text, but should also be a debate about the evolution of the ways readers make sense of texts« (1994, p. 19). Age takes centre stage in such discussions, but what ›age‹ actually means is complex and goes beyond biology. Appleyard himself points out that »some of the characteristic responses of young children to stories can be explained by accounts that focus on cognitive development« (ibid., p. 26), while he simultaneously acknowledges that development is also shaped by »individual-psychological, cultural-sociological, and outer-physical« factors (ibid., p. 161). More recently, scholars have referred to the social dimension as the »enactment« of age, that is, age is »done and made – in and through social practice« (Sparrman 2018, p. 243). Exploring how readers' ages are intertwined with their responses to literature does not reveal pure and absolute biological processes, but exposes the entanglement between biology, culture and social factors.

Aside from strictly academic interest, pursuing this kind of research has also become especially relevant in light of a general increase in intergenerational hostility. In a 2017 United Nations report, the authors worry that »there is a tendency to pit generations against each other, and this is particularly the case when it comes to younger and older people« (2017, p. 24). One component in this dynamic is what some scholars have identified as a »continuing trend toward age segregation [...] in the larger society« (Hareven 1995, p. 117). Powell and Arquitt remark that »older people are disappearing from children's lives, and many young people are growing up with little or no opportunity to have meaningful relationships with the elderly« (1978, p. 421). We seem to be less likely to encounter people of different ages in our daily lives, and more likely to carry negative assumptions about them. In this context, fiction can be used to explore readers' responses to narratives about age in general, and characters of different ages in particular.

The data for this article was collected in the context of a much larger research project called Constructing Age for Young Readers (CAFYR), that ran in Antwerp from the beginning of 2019 until the beginning of 2024, and was conceived with the intent of exploring

from several different angles the meeting point between literature, readers and age. My contribution to that project centred around the core research question: »how does the age of the real reader affect the understanding of age in literature for young readers?« To answer that question, I conducted interviews with 51 readers, between the ages of 9 and 79, about three different children's books, collecting more than 400 000 words of transcript data. Elsewhere I have reported on readers' use of age norms to make sense of their own age and the age of characters (Duthoy 2022; Duthoy 2023a; Duthoy 2024b), readers' entanglement with their environment in the course of their participation in the study (Duthoy 2023b; Duthoy 2024b), and readers' active engagement with activities included in one of the children's books (Duthoy 2024a; Duthoy 2024b). My focus on readers' favourite characters in this article complements this other work. It is based on a smaller subset of data, as later outlined in the methodological framework. First, however, I address favourite characters as a specific topic and establish why they are relevant in the context of age and literature.

Favourite characters

In their article »How Do We React When Our Favorite Characters Are Taken Away?« Julie Lather and Emily Moyer-Guse argue that, although our »relationships [with our favourite characters] are inherently one-sided, they otherwise share many commonalities with real-world relationships« (2011, p. 197). For instance, losing access to one's favourite character can feel like losing a real friend, thus causing genuine emotional distress (ibid., p. 210). Furthermore – as with real friendships and romantic relationships – we may reflect on who we are as individuals in response to our interactions with our favourite characters, potentially mirroring behaviour, or avoiding things the character dislikes or is critical of (Hoffner 1996, pp. 398–399).

While there has not to date been any research that compares the selection of favourite characters from the same story by readers of different ages, some scholars have demonstrated distinct ways in which specific age groups engage with their favourite characters. Thomas Donohue explored children's favourite TV characters and found that, in contrast to characters they cared less about, »children more often imitated the behavior of their favorite characters« (1975, p. 165). Similarly, Tali Te'eni-Harari and Keren Eyal noted that, regarding adolescents' images of their own bodies, »it was the favorite characters that explained body image« (2015, p. 612; see also Hoffner 1996, pp. 398–399). As for older adults, one recent study found that »middle-aged and older adults have reported parasocial relationships as helping them regain feelings of intimacy that have dissipated from their real-life relationships due to negative turning points or the passing of relational partners« (Bernhold / Metzger 2020, p. 169). One key finding was that for certain groups of older adults, »having virtual friendships does appear to slightly decrease depressive symptoms« (ibid., p. 173).

By comparing these researchers' analyses of specific age groups, some broader observations can be made. For instance, Bernhold and Metzger refer to isolation and loneliness when they discuss how older readers position themselves vis-à-vis their favourite characters (2020, p. 10). By contrast, Lather and Moyer-Guse comment that the college students they interviewed handled losing access to their favourite characters well because »students at a large university may have greater opportunities to seek out replacement activities to gratify their needs. As a result, they may have been less distressed« (2011, p. 212). The key factor here concerns where society expects people

of different ages to be. Sparrman writes that age »intertwines with normative ideas of ›right‹ and ›wrong‹: what is, for example, the right age to [...] leave school?« (2018, p. 229). Going to university is not a biological drive that people in their late teens to early twenties experience, but the result of a long social and cultural shift which begins when »the central task of the child's life [is] increasingly seen as attending school« (Mortimer / Moen 2016, p. 113). In other words, adults are less likely to have access to the kinds of social networks that university students have that may help them cope with losing their favourite characters.

While these kinds of unrelated studies can be compared to make a broader point, there has not yet been any research that explicitly compares how readers of different ages engage with characters from the same text. However, this situation leads to many compelling questions: do readers mostly tend to favour characters of their own age group, or do they develop intergenerational »virtual friendships« (Bernhold / Metzger 2020, p. 173)? If they do form those friendships, how do they interact with stereotypes about age? What about the characters readers dislike? Are any connections to be made here about age? This is the gap in academic discourse that the present article engages with.

Research design

This article uses data gathered for a broader research project that explored how the age of the real reader affects their understanding of age in fiction for young readers. The methodology outlined below was designed to gather data on a wide range of topics, of which favourite characters was one.

Participants and recruitment

For the purpose of participant recruitment and data analysis, the life course was subdivided into the following age groups.

Late child: ages 9 to 11
Adolescent: ages 12 to 19
Early adult: ages 20 to 39
Middle adult: ages 40 to 59
Old adult: ages 60 to 79
Deep old adult: ages 80 to 100

The intent was to interview people of as many different ages as possible, and not just to focus on a child-adult contrast. Thus, I tried to recruit roughly the same number of readers from each of these categories. In the data discussed here, each age group was represented by four readers, with the exception of adolescent readers, who are underrepresented, and deep old adult readers, who are not represented at all. These age groups were more significant for other research (Duthoy 2022; Duthoy 2023a) which presents an analysis of the data with different points of focus. For the present discussion, the primary difference that emerged was between child readers and all adult readers, with adolescent readers on the boundary between these two groups.

The 18 participants relevant for the topic at hand were between the ages of 9 and 75 and lived in the Flanders region in Belgium. Most (89 %) were female. Participation was voluntary, and readers were informed that they could opt out at any point in the research

process. No financial reward was offered, but those who participated received a free copy of the book they were asked to read, along with an additional free copy of an unrelated book. All names in this article are pseudonyms. An overview of readers' ages and genders is given in Table 1.
Recruitment took place through a number of different approaches. One third of those who took part responded to calls for participation via social media; 28 % were referred to the research project by various gatekeepers; 17 % replied to a call for participation via the newsletter of a local non-profit organisation that promotes reading; 17 % had expressed prior interest in the project at the University of Antwerp's »Day of Science« event, and one participant replied to flyers that were handed out in Antwerp.

Ella	9	F
Louise	9	F
Agamemnon	11	M
Floor	11	F
Janne	14	F
Fons	19	M
Aniek	27	F
Helena	28	F
Jasmijn	30	F
Ans	33	F
Akke	41	F
Moon	41	F
Boris	49	F
Clara	50	F
Tommy	60	F
Eline	67	F
Margareta	73	F
Fieke	75	F

Table 1. Participants

Interviews and focus-group conversations

Data was gathered between May 2020 and June 2021 in a three-step process. First, each participant joined me for a one-hour, individual, semi-structured interview. In this interview, I talked with readers about the children's book they read, their own age and the ages of the characters. Then, a smaller group of readers joined me for a one-hour focus-group conversation about the book. Finally, I organised 15-minute, individual, follow-up interviews in which readers reflected on their participation.
The interviews and focus-group conversations covered a variety of topics. This article will focus on one set of questions:

- Who was your favourite character?
  - Why?
- Was there a character that you really did not like?
  - Why?

All interviews and focus-group discussions were conducted digitally and recorded via Blackboard Collaborate, the University of Antwerp's online teaching tool. The recordings were transcribed and analysed using NVivo. The quotations in this article are translations from the original Dutch comments made by readers. Best efforts have been made to translate the Dutch comments into English in a way that correctly captures both meaning and tone. In some cases (e. g. swearwords) these decisions were difficult.
Iep! (1996), by Joke van Leeuwen, was selected for the project because none of the characters' ages are mentioned explicitly. Thus, readers are forced to make their own assumptions about age based on their own frame of reference. *Iep!* is about the girl Viegeltje,[1] a half-human, half-bird, who is discovered as a baby by Warre and Tine, a couple living in a shack outside of town. They raise Viegeltje for an indeterminate amount of time. One day, on a trip to the big city, Viegeltje flies away and meets Loetje, a young girl who is left with a nanny by her father because he needs to go on a business trip. After playing with Loetje for a bit, Viegeltje once again moves on. She briefly causes a stir by sitting on the edge of a roof, causing the people below to think she is a child playing on a rooftop. This prompts a character called The Rescuer to try to save her, but

[1] Warre and Tine initially call her »Vogeltje,« literally »little bird.« She herself has difficulties pronouncing the word, and changes it to»Viegeltje,« which Warre and Tine then adopt as her name. In the English translation, the name changes from »Birdy« to »Beedy« (van Leeuwen 2012).

she once again flies away. The rest of the narrative revolves around Warre, Tine, Loetje and The Rescuer travelling together to say goodbye to Viegeltje.

Analysis

Top-level dynamics

A brief look at which characters readers named as their favourites (leaving aside their reasoning for the moment) already reveals a number of trends. Table 2 lists the characters, with the number indicating how often each character was mentioned. Despite readers being asked to pick just one character, some offered a list of their favourites. Louise (9), for example, listed Warre, Tine, Loetje and Viegeltje. As a result, there are more characters mentioned than there were readers.

Character	Times mentioned
No favourite character	4
The Rescuer	1
Warre	4
Tine	3
Viegeltje	6
Loetje	6

Table 2. Readers' favourite characters

A first noticeable result is that readers up to 14 years old almost exclusively picked child characters, with Louise (9) being the one exception. Meanwhile, older adolescent (i. e., Fons [19]) and adult readers picked characters from a broader range of age groups. As the table shows, Viegeltje and Loetje were by far the most popular characters. This popularity was driven largely by young readers, who all picked at least Viegeltje and/or Loetje. Adults were also fond of these child characters. Jasmijn (30), Aniek (27), Eline (67) and Margareta (73) all picked at least one of them as their favourite. However, older adolescent and adult readers also often picked adult characters. For instance, Fons (19) picked Warre and Tine; Akke (40) picked Warre; Clara (50) picked The Rescuer, and Fieke (75) picked Warre and Tine alongside Viegeltje.

A second observable tendency is that only adult readers had no favourite character. For child readers, picking a favourite character was an immediate, uncomplicated choice expressed in a direct statement. When I asked Louise (9) if she had a favourite character, she replied »Yes, Loetje and Warre and Tine. And also Viegeltje.« When I asked Ella (9), she simply said »Loetje.« The same happened when I asked Floor (11), who replied »Viegeltje.« These responses seem to relay a certain ease with which young readers engage with this question. Although there were some adults who replied with similar ease, adult readers generally struggled more. When asked what her favourite character was, Ans (33) let out a surprised »ow,« followed by a long pause, and the tentative reply, »I think Loetje.« Yet when I asked if she could explore why, she immediately changed her mind and said, »You know what, scratch that. I'm going to give it some more thought.« Likewise, when I asked Clara (50), she replied, »yeah maybe The Rescuer. My character. I find this to be a difficult choice, a difficult choice.« Some were unable to pick a favourite character at all, such as Helena (28), Moon (41), Boris (49) and Tommy (60).

These trends become particularly interesting when contrasted with the replies I received regarding characters readers liked the least. In Table 2, each disliked character is listed, with the number indicating how many readers referenced them. As before, some readers mentioned several characters so the numbers do not tally with the number of readers.

Character	Times mentioned
No disliked character	6
Loetje's father	5
Horstel Doctor	4
The Rescuer	2
Bor	1
Boy in green hallway	1
The Rescuer's Mom	1

Table 3. Readers' disliked characters

While young readers had immediate, almost reflexive answers about their favourite character, only one reader under the age of 20 had a character they did not like: Janne (14) initially had replied, »No, not really,« before later correcting herself and stating that she did not like Loetje's father. In addition, their responses to the question about whether there were any characters they disliked were notably uniform.

- Louise (9): »No, not really no.«
- Ella (9): »No, not really.«
- Agamemnon (11): »No, not really no.«
- Floor (11): »No.«
- Fons (19): »No, not really.«

However, almost all adult readers easily identified one or more characters they did not like. Furthermore, adult readers generally disliked adult characters. On the two occasions that child characters were disliked, this dislike was expressed in milder terms than those used for adult characters, for whom expletives like »bastard« or »asshole« were sometimes used. By contrast, Clara (50) commented that she did not like the child character »Bor because he keeps escaping me. I don't know why.« Margareta (73), the only other reader who disliked child characters, claimed to dislike both Bor and the unnamed boy who lives in a green hallway. Her reason for disliking these characters was similarly mild, only commenting that she »did not have any affection for that boy in the green hallway, nor for Bor.« Beyond this point, both readers struggled to express why they did not like these characters.

Looking at the characters readers picked as their favourite or least favourite, even before examining specific comments made by readers, some patterns emerge. Child readers liked child characters, without disliking adult characters. Indeed, adult characters seemed to be somewhat »invisible« to child readers, who found little to like or dislike. Furthermore, favourite characters was an easy topic for child readers to discuss, whereas questions about disliked characters elicited few or no replies. In adult readers, some of these tendencies were absent or even fully reversed. Adult readers were fond of a broader range of characters in terms of age, but also struggled at times with picking a character that they liked. Adults also easily identified characters they disliked. On the surface, this seems to indicate a more prominent age-preference among young readers, and a lack of one among adult readers. Fons (19) falls in between the two groups. Like the younger readers, he does not have a character he dislikes, but he picks adult characters as his favourites.

The next section explores the reasons readers give for picking a favourite or least favourite character. One significant caveat here is that not all readers have deep or nuanced reflections about why they liked or disliked characters. For example, when asked what she liked about Loetje, Ans (33) replied, »It is more of a feeling than something I can describe.« The following section therefore looks at a smaller sample of readers – only those who shared concrete reasons.

A detailed look

Younger and older readers' reasons for liking a character differed. Child readers often identified features specific to the character itself as being important. Ella (9) used a Flemish idiom to express that she liked Loetje because she is an energetic, animated child. Agamemnon (11) picked Loetje because »she is wild and is curious the whole

time.« Floor (11) was a big fan of Viegeltje »because she could fly.« Janne (14) liked Viegeltje because of her »independence and how free she was and that she always knew a solution.« Although the specifics varied, young readers tended to identify distinct aspects of a character taken directly from the book. By contrast, adult readers often referenced the broader context in which they read the book, or made deeper reflections about themselves. Furthermore, when adult readers discussed what they liked about a character, age was often thematised.

Some adult readers, for instance, explicitly pointed to characters' ages as the core factor that they connected with; for example, Margareta (73) made the broader claim that she was fond of Loetje because »she recognises a young girl in her.« In a similar statement, Fons (19) liked Warre and Tine because he sees »the innocence of my grandparents in them. The innocence of old people.« Other adult readers appreciated characters because they had experienced the book intergenerationally. Jasmijn (30) said she »read the book to my young son and he thought that the way Viegeltje talked was very funny. So every time we read Viegeltje's lines in the book out loud he laughed so hard. Maybe that is why I found her the most fun character.« Finally, adult readers also remarked on their own age to explain why they liked a character. Eline (67) clarified her soft spot for Viegeltje by pointing to her »headstrong attitude. She dares to break out and [...] follows her own nature. That is what I like about that character.« Immediately afterwards, she added that she »reads that as an adult of course.« Thus, age comes to the foreground in adult thoughts on their favourite character in a number of different ways. Be it their own age, the age of characters, or even the intergenerational experience of literature, adult readers use age as a prism to contextualise their feelings about favourite characters.

At first glance, child readers demonstrate a preference for child characters. Yet not one child reader made an explicit comment about age informing their choice. Although it is true that some of the traits that child readers identify to explain their fondness for a child character are arguably culturally linked to childhood (e. g. curiosity, playfulness), they also mention Viegeltje's ability to fly as a determining factor, which is not connected to her age. However, adult readers picked favourite characters of a variety of ages, but often explicitly referenced age in some way as determining at least part of their choice. Thus, although age was not expressed in terms of a clear preference for adult characters among adult readers, age was something that adult readers were highly cognisant of and actively reflected on.

This complex interaction between readers, age and characters was also evident in their thoughts on their least favourite characters. This can be shown by focusing on one character in particular: Loetje's father, who was by far the least-liked character, despite his rather brief appearance. Loetje's father is only present for about five pages (and her mother is never mentioned). He is introduced in this paragraph:[2]

> Loetje lived with her dad in the house. Her dad was very busy. It seemed as if he had to take care of everything. He made sure the cars drove on the right side of the road, and that the autumn leaves were taken care of before winter came, and that houses

[2] The translation of this paragraph is by the author rather than taken from the English translation by Bill Nagelkerke. In Nagelkerke's translation, Loetje's father says »I don't have time for you right now« (van Leeuwen 2012, p. 53), whereas in the original Dutch version, he tells her that he has no use for her: »Ik kan jou nu even niet gebruiken« (van Leeuwen 1996, p. 53). Because my participants read the Dutch original, in which the Dutch word for time, tijd, does not feature, I give my more literal translation of the passage to convey the element of the text that participants responded to.

> continued to stand up straight. Everything. He was a worried man and his head and pants looked the part. He had no use for visitors. Often he did not have use for Loetje either. That is something he said: »I can't use you right now.« (translation of van Leeuwen 1996, pp. 52–53)

About halfway through the book, Loetje's father leaves for work, and Loetje is left at home with a nanny.

Adult readers resoundingly disliked Loetje's father. Furthermore, when compared to the few adult readers who disliked child characters, the adult readers who disliked Loetje's father were significantly more vitriolic. Fieke (75) said that Loetje's »father is an asshole«; Ans (33) said that he »is a bastard«; and Clara (50) described him as »chilly and cold and robotic.« Fons (19) remarked that he »is more invested in his career than in his daughter. She seems to be an impediment for him.« Aniek (27) remarked that he »seemed to be a bit blunt to that child.« Adult readers' dislike for Loetje's father is clearly centred on how he treats his daughter, both in the way he talks to her and in his decision to leave her with a nanny while he goes on a work trip.

What made adult readers' views on Loetje's father particularly revealing was the fact that – although there were no child readers who picked him as their favourite – there were several young readers who offered more charitable interpretations of the relationship between Loetje and her father. Louise (9) remarked briefly on the father's affection for Loetje, saying that »he was naughty but also not. […] I think he does love his daughter.« Meanwhile, Floor (11) interpreted the father's behaviour as the actions of a man who understands his daughter well. She argued that »Loetje prefers being by herself and I think that the father knows that and that that is why he doesn't spend much time with Loetje.« In response to this comment, I asked Floor whether she felt that these characters should spend more time together, to which she replied, »No, not necessarily.«

Janne (14) offered the most extensive reflection on Loetje's father. She had a nuanced perspective, motivated at least in part through her experience with her own father, who often had to leave for work: »I remember how much I didn't like it when my dad left. So, I can identify with Loetje.« She remembered being sad when her father left, but also felt that Loetje should not be too hard on him, because after all, »he works for her, right? To give her food and shelter.« In that sense, she contextualised the fictional father's seemingly cold behaviour in the larger picture of care for his daughter, based on her own real-life father's struggles. Thus, Janne demonstrated insight into the complexities of middle adulthood and the demands on parents as providers and caretakers. Although she still picked him as her least favourite character, Janne explicitly recognised that he had responsibilities that prohibited him from being more present in Loetje's life.

Several readers reacted against a common trope in children's literature: »parents often fail to take care of their children, who are then put in the care of […] substitute parents« (Joosen 2018, p. 12). For the purposes of the narrative, this allows Loetje to go on her adventure without being hampered by parental supervision. However, readers react to this narrative trope through a real-world lens that is informed in part by expectations about how parents should take care of their children. Crucially, these expectations are not universal. Social scientists have remarked on how cultural norms of childhood independence can differ significantly. An editorial comment in an article on Norwegian child-parent relationships pointed out that, compared to other countries, »the Norwegian attitude to children may appear indifferent and sloppy. Taking Britain as a contrast, people in general would conceive 10 years as a rather young age for children

to be left alone« (Solberg 1997, p. 130). Indeed, what constitutes abandonment for some is acceptable for others. In 1997, Annette Sorensen, an actress from Copenhagen, was arrested, together with her husband, in New York City for the crime of leaving their 14-month-old child alone in her stroller outside while they ate in a restaurant in the East Village. Following her arrest, Sorensen claimed that she thought »the common Danish practice of leaving children unattended outside restaurants and shops was equally acceptable in New York« (Marcano 1997).

The adult readers and child readers I interviewed essentially adopt different perspectives that fit within this broader discussion. Adult readers almost invariably disliked Loetje's father for what they perceived as his abandonment of his daughter. Meanwhile, younger readers were not particularly fond of him, but nevertheless came to his defence, sketching an image of a father who loves his daughter, understands her needs and goes to work to provide for her. More interesting is the fact that the only instance of explicit identification was from Janne (14), who identified with Loetje but did so in order to defend Loetje's father. In other words, instead of »identification with media characters [leading to] feelings of affinity [and] friendship« (Cohen 2001, p. 248) with those characters, here the identification with one character leads to positive feelings towards another, and furthermore, it does so across intergenerational boundaries.

Concluding thoughts

In general, this data does not reveal a direct link between readers' ages and their choice of favourite or least favourite characters. Nevertheless, some compelling findings emerge. When comparing child and adult readers, child readers seem relatively oblivious to age with regard to their favourite characters. They seem to demonstrate a preference for child characters, yet they explain their choices by referring to traits that are only occasionally or tangentially related to age. There were no cases of overt identification, in which child readers explained their preference for child characters by claiming they reminded them of themselves. Meanwhile, adult readers explicitly reflected on age when justifying their choice of favourite characters, not in order to pick characters close in age to themselves, but rather when picking characters from across the lifespan.

When we look at least favourite characters, we once again see notable differences between child and adult readers. In the case of Loetje's father – the least-liked character –some of the ire directed towards him came from his perceived failure as a parent. Notably, even though child readers were unable to pick a character they disliked, they still participated in this conversation by coming to the defence of Loetje's father. The result is that Loetje's father is vilified by adult readers because of his apparent failure as a father, yet redeemed by child readers who see him at worst as doing what he can for his daughter, and at best as a loving father who understands his daughter well. Although age is not explicitly mentioned here, readers nevertheless implicitly contextualise Loetje's father within a broader discourse on parenthood and the treatment of children. Thus, age is at no point a directly correlated predictor of the characters of whom readers become fond. Instead, expectations that readers tie to particular ages seem to be part of a framework within which characters are judged.

Younger readers' defence of Loetje's father offers possibilities for reflection in the broader context in which this research project was framed. One positive finding is that, in a time of concern about increasing intergenerational conflict, this data seems to indicate that intergenerational »virtual friendships« (Bernhold / Metzger 2020, p. 173)

are possible in the reception of literary texts. I found it particularly compelling that – compared to adult readers – young readers were more prepared to forgive an adult character's shortcomings, and adult readers were much milder in in their criticism of child characters they favoured less, compared to the vitriol they aimed at disliked adult characters. In both cases, some grace is extended across generational boundaries, with child readers defending adult characters, and adult readers being gentler towards child characters. While further research should be done to understand these dynamics, the present discussion indicates the value of exploring how readers of different ages reflect on what they like and dislike in literary characters of different ages, highlighting the potential of literature to encourage intergenerational friendships – even if they are only virtual ones.

Primary Literature

van Leeuwen, Joke (1996): Iep! Amsterdam: Querido

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