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NARRATIVE EMPATHY AND THE CHALLENGE OF THE UNRELATABLE

Abstract:

The essay explores the everyday aesthetic judgment embedded in "relatable" representations and takes on the challenge of the "unrelatable". It advances the theorizing of narrative empathy by considering why some representations are judged "unrelatable". The unrelatable fails at the first hurdle if it was crafted with the intention of evoking empathy (though not all narratives share that aim). If narratives are to galvanize feeling for distant others, nonhuman animals, the inanimate world and changing climate, and our descendants, then understanding what makes representations unrelatable matters. But if the response inheres primarily in readers, then forbearance from condemnation matters more.

Keywords: Failed Empathy, Relatable, Storyworld, Strategic Narrative Empathy, Unrelatable

This essay advances the theorizing of narrative empathy, a mode of aesthetic empathy, by taking seriously readers' and viewers' declarations that certain fictional representations are "unrelatable". Narrative empathy describes the capacity of narrative fiction to invite readers into unfamiliar worlds, where they can be spurred to share the imagined experiences, perspectives, and emotions of characters and other storyworld elements, coaxed into identifying with persons radically different from themselves as they overcome barriers of distance, dissimilarity, and unfamiliarity that prevail in lived experience. Sustained exposure to narrative develops what Vera Nünning describes as readers' "narrative competence", which plays a «crucial role in the processes involved in comprehending others»[1]. One such process involves narrative empathy. If you find yourself sharing the feelings and perspectives of a fictional character, not necessarily approving of the character's actions or endorsing their motivations, but *feeling with them*, you have experienced narrative empathy. By definition, a work that inspires narrative empathy is, at least temporarily, "relatable". An unrelatable representation fails at the first hurdle if it is crafted with the intention of evoking empathy.

Some representations are deliberately created with antipathetic affective aims, such as disgust, horror, or fear, and in those cases being "unrelatable" is predictable, whereas being "relatable" would be a cause for concern. There is nothing unusual about stalled, stymied, or absent empathy in real life. Failed intersubjective empathy is extremely common, but because its literary variant is sometimes imagined to possess powers to transcend barriers of dissimilarity, distance, and unfamiliarity, an unrelatable narrative indicts its reader or viewer when it does not evoke identification or a rooting interest. Including the overweening ambition for its efficacy, narrative empathy differs from ordinary, real-life human empathy in a number of ways. But it resembles real-world affective relations in its limitations. No one fictional text or narrative representation evokes empathy from every reader or viewer. A common reason given for dissenting from the invitation to feel with a fiction would be the verdict, delivered with an indifferent shrug: "It's unrelatable".

As I have earlier outlined, narrative empathy is characterized by:

> The sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition. Narrative empathy plays a role

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[1] Nünning (2014), p. 17.

Bollettino Filosofico 37 (2022): 104-116
ISSN 1593 -7178 - 00030
E-ISSN 2035 -2670
DOI 10.6093/1593-7178/9653

> in the aesthetics of production when authors experience it, in mental simulation during reading, in the aesthetics of reception when readers experience it, and in the narrative poetics of texts when formal strategies invite it. Narrative empathy overarches narratological categories, involving actants, narrative situation, matters of pace and duration, and storyworld features such as settings[2].

As many others have shown, the resources of story-telling, including fictional worldmaking, the invitation to narrative immersion[3], characterization of those whose real-life counterparts would be outside the readers' experience or antipathetic, and the affects fundamental to narrativity, can evoke readers' empathy[4]. In the relatively low-risk circumstances of reading or viewing, experiences of narrative empathy may more readily transcend the barriers of dissimilarity, unfamiliarity, and distance that often impede real-life empathy. For a fluent reader, encountering a social world within a work tagged as fictional, empathic connection with that world and its imaginary inhabitants may come easily. Much depends upon the co-creating reader's own identity, disposition, and experiences[5], but their connection through narrative empathy often leads readers to declare a narrative work, a plotline, or a fictional character as "relatable". Or, it may work the other way round, as recognition of the "relatable" opens the way for narrative empathy and even sympathetic concern. A single narrative may even offer pathways of both kinds, with avenues beginning with similarity and others that surprise a reader into relating through situational emotional fusion.

In this essay I explore not only the everyday aesthetic judgment embedded in that terminology of the "relatable", but I also broach the real challenge of the "unrelatable". For surely there are limitations to even the most highly empathetic readers' ability to feel with *some* narrative subjects. Children, horses, pets, injured or ill people and creatures are easy; convicted murderers, sex-offenders, micro-organisms and icefields are harder. Confronting the challenge of the unrelatable seems to me an important step if we are to employ the narrative arts to galvanize feeling for harder cases: the distant others that Adam Smith called up for our contemplation; the nonhuman animals that J.M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello champions; the inanimate natural world and its changing climate; and the denizens of our own planet in the not-so distant future. Acknowledging the artistic and persuasive strategies involved in eliciting empathy for the intrinsically unrelatable emphasizes the ordinary, everyday barriers that narrative fiction can, but need not, overcome.

In this essay I meditate on the qualities of the relatable and the unrelatable, considering them as aesthetic judgments that bear on the potentiality of narrative empathy, especially when it is deployed strategically by novelists. I begin by parsing what readers mean by these terms, and in so doing I resist the urge to locate the explanation entirely in inadequate readers' failings. In my view, readers are always enjoined by narratives to become the texts' co-creators, and that makes their reading experiences protean, perhaps especially when narrative artists have designs on their readers' feelings. Yet as writers make representational choices that invite or rebuff response, they work in a medium that itself possesses both the affordances of narrativity, and also the limitations of the attention spans and dispositions of readers. Though I do not propose that narrative art ought always to be dedicated to perspective-expanding efforts, many writers do employ strategic narrative empathy in an attempt to cultivate connections, create a sense of shared stakes, and even to influence readers' attitudes and behavior[6]. When a test shows the traces of

[2] Keen (2014), p. 521.

[3] See Nell (1988).

[4] For a helpful overview, see Stansfield and Bunce (2014), and canonically, Gerrig (1993). For a careful study of narrative immersion, see Bal and Veltkamp (2013).

[5] Keen (2011).

[6] Some definitions: «bounded strategic empathy occurs within an in-group, stemming from experiences of mutuality, and leading to feeling with familiar others. The bards of the in-group call upon bounded empathy,

strategic narrative empathy and its mission fails to elicit the aimed-for response, we should pause to inquire why not. This question need not be posed in a spirit of negative judgment, but rather as an exercise of curiosity. Both introspection and conversation can be useful. Implicit biases of which we are unaware can be rendered legible, and thus available for discussion, by engaging with texts that employ strategic narrative empathy effectively, and by those that make the attempt and fail.

As long as those goals are pursued by creators of narratives and those who use stories to teach, then understanding what features make a work unrelatable rewards our attention. Unrelatability may stem from aspects of form or content or both. For example, unrelatable qualities of temporality (remoteness and pace), scale, species-level difference, and other alienating traits can impede empathic response. The brilliant scientifically-grounded tales of Italo Calvino in his *Cosmicomics* (1965, Eng. trans. 1968) lay bare narrative devices that can render unpromisingly distant, inert, or antipathetic subjects fleetingly empathetic, but their virtuosic charm sparkles in juxtaposition with their deliberately unrelatable subjects. Giving molecules and reactions names, anthropomorphizing planets in orbit through social relations and desires, imbuing a mollusk with interiority: these strategies highlight the storyteller's toolkit for inviting curiosity and connection. But using the techniques of narrative situation, representation of fictional minds, and characterization of selves in relations to others (as Calvino does with his narrator old Qfwfq and a cast of equations, hydrogen atoms, and dinosaurs) does not inevitably lead to readers' identification, narrative immersion, empathetic response, and relatability. Does the difference lie in the author's attitudes, the text itself, or the readers? The purpose of acquiring this understanding could be to inform makers' aesthetic choices, if they pursue the rewarding path of writing relatable fiction. But gaining this knowledge could also prove useful in a pedagogy of resistance, one that aims to equip consumers of countless narratives with the skills to rebuff empathetic invitations based on biased representations playing on in-group fears of despised out-groups.

Though empathy is usually associated with prosocial outcomes, empathetic narrative techniques do not automatically or inevitably lead to empathetic responses or altruistic actions, and they can be bent to immoral, unjust, or criminal purposes. As Fritz Breithaupt has persuasively argued, there are darker sides to empathy, and that includes narrative empathy. A persuasive medium that can invite a reader or viewer inside the role, perspective, or thought-stream of an agent whose deplorable actions or disgusting situation can be rendered comprehensible or pitiable may adopt techniques of empathy to reverse revulsion and recruit fellow-feeling. The examples are legion, from literary fiction to comics and video games. Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), which engages the narrative affects of suspense and curiosity to develop readers' empathy with and sympathy for Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald serves as a prominent example. The disarming fictional SS officer and narrator of Jonathan Littell's Prix Goncourt-winning *The Kindly Ones* (2006, trans. 2009) recruits readers' attention with an appeal to their human brotherhood, even as he relates his unapologetic participation in crimes against humanity. White supremacist comic books and novels disseminated by the American Nazi Party are designed to play on young white male readers' injured pride and fear of being displaced by people of color[7]. The "No Russian" mission in Activision's *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009) invites the player to participate in a mass shooting at a Russian airport, leveraging an emotional connection between the gamer and a terrorist character, Vladimir Makarov. Each one of these cases involves strategic narrative empathy. The capacity of narrative to marshal

and lack of familiarity may indeed prevent outsiders from joining the empathetic circle. [...] Second, ambassadorial strategic empathy addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end. Appeals for justice, recognition, and assistance often take this form. [...] Third, broadcast strategic empathy calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing our common vulnerabilities and hopes» (Keen, 2006, p. 215). For an expanded discussion, see Keen (2008).

[7] Keen (2007), pp. 131-132.

engagement, character identification, and imitation seems most disturbing when the representation is vicious or deplorable. In cases like these, we can only hope that the targets of empathetic representation are "unrelatable". A fear that these subjects and anti-heroic perpetrators will prove *all too relatable* can provoke censorship and book-banning along with hand-wringing condemnations. Usually, though, narrative empathy avoids taking the blame, because ordinary human empathy is so firmly associated with other-directed prosociality and altruism, despite cogent critiques[8] and descriptions of the darker alternatives[9].

In the anglophone world, not just in the United States, it is not uncommon to hear or read critical judgements of a work of fiction – a novel, a story, a film, or a television show – in terms of whether (or not) it is "relatable". The redoubtable crowd-sourced reference source *The Urban Dictionary* explains that relatable is a "Word very much in use by students, meaning someone or something you can relate to". Younger readers have been using this terminology to record their warm or cool responses to narratives, in terms of their ability or inability to connect with its characters or world, for at least two decades. The word "relatable" itself roared out of obscurity, from its origin as a synonym for "appropriate for comparison" in mid-century: morphing into slang for "sympathetic" or "recognizable" in the 1950s; rising steadily through the 1960s; peaking – at least in the English language printed books that comprise the Google Books corpus – in the mid 1970s; moderating through the year 2000; and increasing exponentially since then. Google "relatable" and you will get over 1.1 billion hits, up from 75 million hits in 2018.

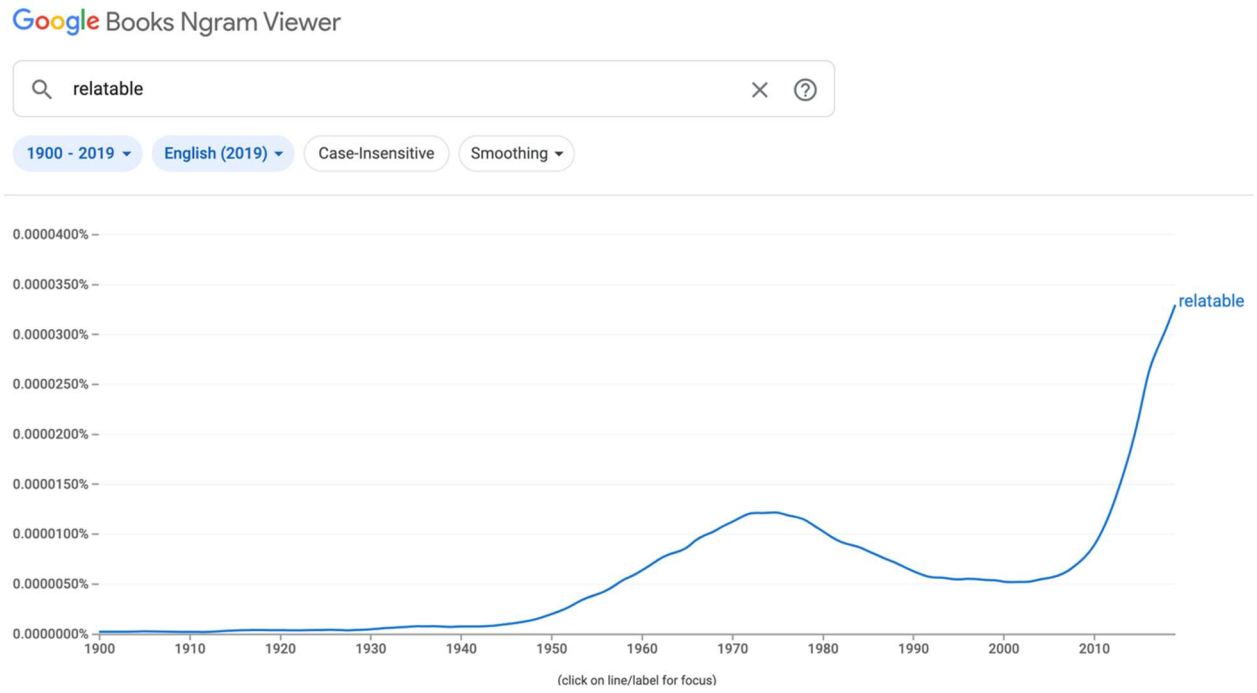

Fig. 1. Google Books Ngram for occurrences of "relatable" 1900-2019

Relatable is here to stay. My anecdotal evidence, drawn from the natural vocabulary of students in college and university classrooms, suggests that "relatable" is a stock term of aesthetic approbation, used to *approve* of a work, or, in its negative mode, to disparage it. As a teacher of English literature, I have been waging an unsuccessful rearguard campaign to stamp it out, or at the very least to persuade students to replace it in their written work with the more dignified term, "sympathetic", or "unsympathetic" for unrelatable. At the

[8] Bloom (2019); Prinz (2011).
[9] Breithaupt (2017, trans. 2019).

very least, the idiomatic expressions surrounding those traditional terms commit a writer to provide a reason or two for the judgment, and leave open the possibility of persuasion – our sympathies can be shifted. The cultivation of sympathy has an honored role in moral development: I can change my mind about an unsympathetic character if learn more, or discuss the matter with another who feels differently. "Relatable" and "unrelatable" are ostensibly other-oriented, but they do not point to a developing view that might be changed with more information. Whether offered in terms of praise or blame, these judgments are conversation-stoppers. To question such an utterance is to negate the speaker's feelings, an argumentative dead-end if ever there was one.

Other commentators also swim against the tide in criticizing the term "relatable". *Slate* senior editor and contributor Rebecca Onion observes in her intervention, «The Awful Emptiness of "Relatable"», that

> My students understood the word as a compliment, applying it to texts, situations, and characters. […] At first, I liked hearing the adjective – yay! I picked the right, resonant thing to assign! – but I soon noticed that the comment, when made in discussion, cut conversation short. Students would nod at each other across the classroom, clearly feeling like they'd cracked that nut. Yeah! Relatable. That's when the word began to irk me. No teacher likes a critique-killer.
>
> The word bothers me most, I've since decided, because it presumes that the speaker's experiences and tastes are common and normative. "Relatable" is in the eye of the beholder, but its very nature is to represent itself as universal. It's shorthand that masquerades as description. Without knowing *why* you find something "relatable", I know nothing about either you or it[10].

Onion marshals to the cause Professor Adam Hooks of the University of Iowa, whom she catches in a censorious moment. He writes, «"Relatable" is a sign of a failure to engage with the work or text, a failure to get beyond one's own concerns to confront the unfamiliar and the uncomfortable»[11]. Hooks's pedagogical context as a Shakespearean alerts him to the barrier Elizabethan English poses for students reading Shakespeare, but a reluctance to overcome a linguistic challenge is the least of his concerns. For Hooks the standard implied by "relatable" demands that the text render itself accessible to a reader making little effort, either to understand strange words, imagine unfamiliar experiences, or entertain discomforting ideas. Onion concurs and extends the critique, writing «the quest for the "relatable" *circumscribes the expansion of empathy* that you can gain through exposure to new things. When the word "relatable" really means "relevant to me", as it often does in the classroom, anything outside the purview of "relatability" looks like it's not worth examining»[12].

Relatable seems to these critics a shallow response, an egotistical assertion of a self-oriented standard for connection, which leads little room for anything but the recognition of one's self in another's experience. Even though it can be uttered in a self-deprecating fashion, to mock a shared "first-world problem", "relatable" seems like a word that doesn't really belong in the discussion of serious literature. After all, here is the *Urban Dictionary's* top definition of the word: «When you find a sad quote that represents your life and your like omg that's so me». I call the representatives of a generation that expresses itself thusly the "relatable readers".

The dominance of relatable, as an aesthetic standard, for this generation of readers raises both philosophical and narrative-theoretical questions. But first we need to consider whether it marks their age and stage as readers rather than some deeper and more

[10] Onion (2014).
[11] Qtd. in Onion (2014).
[12] Onion (2014), my emphasis.

concerning lack. As a starting point, consider the assumption on the part of the relatable readers, that the surprise (omg!) of discovering an image of oneself in a work about fictional others should be an especially praiseworthy outcome of fiction reading. (We know that "relatable" is a standard of aesthetic judgement not only from its positive valence as a term of praise, but also from the use of "unrelatable" to dismiss a work). It is easy to criticize this response as lazy egotism, as Hooks does. This would be to ignore the developmental stage of secondary school and college-aged readers. There is nothing unusual or wrong about teenagers reading to find themselves; their quests of self-discovery and efforts to find like-minded groups of peers are normal aspects of their maturation. Indeed, as Shameem Black observes, learning about others through literary reading «constitutes an important part of one's own social identity. Many of the acts that help individuals shape themselves cannot always be distinguished from the acts that help them learn about different parts of the world or about different kinds of world experience»[13]. It would be surprising indeed if maturing readers' everyday concerns did not inflect their reading experiences, especially when it comes to the features of representation that catch their attention as relevant to their own preoccupations.

But conversation with the relatable readers who make up this student generation reveals that they do not enter into co-creation with the *expectation* of finding images of themselves: it comes as a pleasurable surprise when it happens. It can be a validating experience when readers from underrepresented groups discover affinities that prompt resonant reading experiences. The chance of offering readers an encounter with fiction that represents their identities or concerns argues for diversified reading lists, with the understanding that no one work will work for all readers. I disagree with Hooks that a response of "relatable" reveals «a failure to engage with the work or text, a failure to get beyond one's own concerns to confront the unfamiliar and the uncomfortable». First, the reader's individual concerns may be pressing, and seeing them reflected in a fictional work may contribute to a sense of belonging, recognition, and potentially emotion regulation. "Relatable" *can* describe what happens when a reader has entered into a fictional world with no expectation of self-discovery, yet has encountered a character or situation that speaks to their concerns, in spite of the discomforts of unfamiliarity.

Many readers of this generation enjoy fiction as an escape, reading to get away from themselves, to get out of this world, indeed to immerse themselves in alien experiences and storyworlds[14]. Openness to immersion reading experiences of all sorts of fiction, including in popular subgenres, can open pathways to increased empathy and even altruism[15]. Reading fantasy fiction about obviously unreal communities, for example, can give readers a warm sense of belonging[16]. Encountering barriers to immersion reading, as for example difficulties of comprehension posed by challenging vocabulary or the tone of elevated diction, extreme disorder in the narration of events that makes the plot hard to follow, or representations that provoke personal distress can all make reading experiences less inviting to experiences of transportation, or the immersive trance. If a reader persists with a difficult text and is surprised into recognition, we may be in the presence not of callow egotism, but genuine *anagnorisis*, which is to say, a startling discovery, a recognition that produces a change from ignorance to knowledge. Fritz Breithaupt writes of *anagnorisis* that this literary effect may «reveal a common, everyday experience» of perceiving not only ourselves, but how others perceive us, an empathetic multiplication of perceptions and perspectives that makes up an «essential aspect of our social lives»[17].

[13] Black (2010), p. 36.

[14] For a qualitative study of a group of young readers who prize escape into immersion reading experiences, see Blackford (2004); on immersion, see Green and Brock (2000).

[15] A suite of related articles by psychologist Dan R. Johnson and his students explores this phenomenon. See Johnson, et al. (2013a); Johnson, et. al. (2013b); Johnson (2013); and Johnson (2012).

[16] Gabriel and Young (2012).

[17] Breithaupt (2017, trans. 2019).

By employing a word associated with the workings of Greek tragedy, I throw down a gauntlet, not for the first time. If we are to comprehend what is going on when readers encounter fictional texts that move their feelings, we need to enlarge the boundaries of the *literary*, first to include readers' experiences and second to consider the texts they actually read, including but not limited to an admired literary canon. Specifically, resonant fictions may be any narratives that encourage immersion reading, including graphic narratives and genre fiction. I advocate meeting readers where they are, and if that's with Katniss Everdene or Hermione Granger, fine! It's important to recognize the tastes of readers in the wild if we have a hope of their realizing the benefits of more demanding imaginative work. Endorsing rather than disdaining the choices of regular readers could make literature itself more "relatable". If immersion reading of popular fiction exercises readers' empathy, inviting transportation into other worlds and encouraging co-creation through the pleasurable effects of recognition, resonance, emotional connection, and a feeling of belonging, then reluctant readers surprised by the relatable might actually want to read more. Relatable fiction can act as a gateway drug to get readers hooked on the experience of meeting other minds in storyworlds.

Yet a standard of relatability, as put forward by readers' critique, is commonly perceived by their teachers as a limitation. It is understood as expressing readers' reluctance to encounter the unfamiliar. Since another prominent purpose of fiction reading, beyond reading to find and understand oneself and reading for immersive escapism, concerns reading that can be regarded as mind-expanding and attitude-improving, a lack of relatability poses a challenge. This motive for fiction reading prevails among teachers, and for people who do not read for pleasure outside of school or university settings, it may be the *only* purpose of reading they have ever been exposed to, along with simple check-list test-preparation (e.g., you are in 9th grade, so it is time to read *Animal Farm* [1945] and *To Kill a Mockingbird* [1960]). Improving reading tends to be related to social issues, organized around representation of historical events such as the Holocaust or, in the US, the Civil Rights Movement. It may emphasize the experiences of a racial or ethnic minority. Every time a middle school teacher has her class read *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Bluest Eye*, reaping the civic and moral benefits of this kind of *improving* reading is part of what's going on. Exposure to authors' strategic narrative empathy ensues, with its ambassadorial aims of outreach to new audiences who are enjoined to feel with and even act on the behalf of the representational subjects.

In the hands of a talented teacher, the discussion of a novel with a thesis or a socially beneficial project, such as opening readers' minds to the experiences of people subject to prejudice and discrimination, or familiarizing them with a text that can provoke conversation about current events can also serve additional aims, for example, helping students attain cultural literacy or improve their vocabulary and writing skills. It does not preclude fostering self-recognition or understanding of a pertinent context: it is not a coincidence that George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published back in 1949 soared back onto the bestseller lists in January 2017, after Kellyanne Conway defended President Trump's point of view with «alternative facts»[18]. It is not a wrong use of novels to seek wisdom in them. But it should not come as a tremendous surprise that many readers do not readily find images of themselves or their situations in improving reading. When teachers employ improving reading, they may hope that students find the characters sympathetic, but few would count on that response from most or even many readers.

Improving reading has other virtues. It can be pleasurable. It can bring joy at the skill of the novelist's craft, style, and conversation with precursors, as in the works of Toni Morrison. By definition, this mind-expanding, attitude-shifting sort of fiction reading, which very often takes place in school settings, as *required* reading, aims at changing its reader for the better. We should be aware of how that kind of frame for reading makes the

[18] de Freytas-Tamura (2017), p. C4.

reading experience feel, especially when it does away with the inviting elements of entertainment or immersion that ordinarily entice readers to engage. It should be no surprise that such reading may not be perceived by readers as "relatable". Given the compulsory circumstances of most improving reading, that judgement should not be regarded as either teachers' or students' failure. Awakening awareness of an historical or social situation, often involving injustice, does not require that readers rate the experience "relatable", but it does require sustained attention. In my view, it is accomplishment enough to introduce students to a memorable depiction to which they give their attention, complicating their understanding in the process. But the emphasis on empathy as an end-goal of improving reading sets a high bar for fiction reading.

The pedagogical context of school and university-aged readers' encounters with literary fiction habitually emphasizes the virtue of encountering difference and otherness. The canon of improving reading depends upon an assumption about learning empathy for others. For example, the website "We Are Teachers" recommends 24 books that teach about social justice, with the admonition: «Our classroom libraries are often windows into worlds our students cannot imagine, *but must learn if they are to develop into empathetic citizens.* Books about social justice allow our students insight into what it feels like to be a refugee, to encounter racism, or to have to fight against great odds for rights and freedoms which others take for granted»[19]. This is the standard view, widely shared, and I can only offer the caution that we ought not overestimate the powers of novels on their own to create empathetic citizens. Many teachers, librarians, authors, book-lovers, and narrative ethicists believe that the cultivation of good world citizens, in Martha Nussbaum's phrase, depends upon novels that teach readers what it feels like to be somebody other than themselves, and that the process of feeling with fictional others, especially in a social justice context, is a necessary step in that formation of empathetic citizens[20]. This use of literature to cultivate empathetic, other-oriented citizens extends to programs that reach older readers as well, through community-wide reads, reading group guides, and library programming. I take the view that developing empathetic citizens would certainly be a good thing, contra concerns that empathy can be an unreliable source of altruism, efficacious political action, or just allocation of resources. But I question whether a prescribed diet of improving reading will impel the younger generations to become other-directed, caring fellow-citizens. Their responses with respect to the relatable teach us something about their developmental stage, the burdens and privileges of their own experiences, circumstances, and identities, and the riskiness of entrusting so much to fiction.

Resistant readers with an alternative, immersive style of pleasure reading in mind may judge improving school texts negatively for a lack of relatability. The context of edification may itself throw up a barrier. Requiring readers, especially secondary school-aged students (who are naturally focused on the social challenges of belonging) to clear multiple linguistic, stylistic and cultural hurdles can get in the way of realizing the aims of improving reading, especially if empathetic reading is the goal. The hurdles include the following: linguistic challenges of reading level and vocabulary attainment; historical remoteness; geographical distance; and unfamiliarity, especially around categorical identity. Finally, when it comes to novels, there's the hurdle of length. This cuts in two directions: too long to teach; too short to really get immersed in. Whatever the reason, judgements of fictional works as "Unrelatable" are not uncommon. Slavery is unrelatable. Children separated from their parents at the border: unrelatable. Genocide, torture, aerial bombardment, imprisonment, exile, life as an undocumented person? Unrelatable: or, with an apologetic tone, «I just didn't find it relatable».

[19] "We Are Teachers" (3 May 2021).
[20] Nussbaum (1997), p. 90.

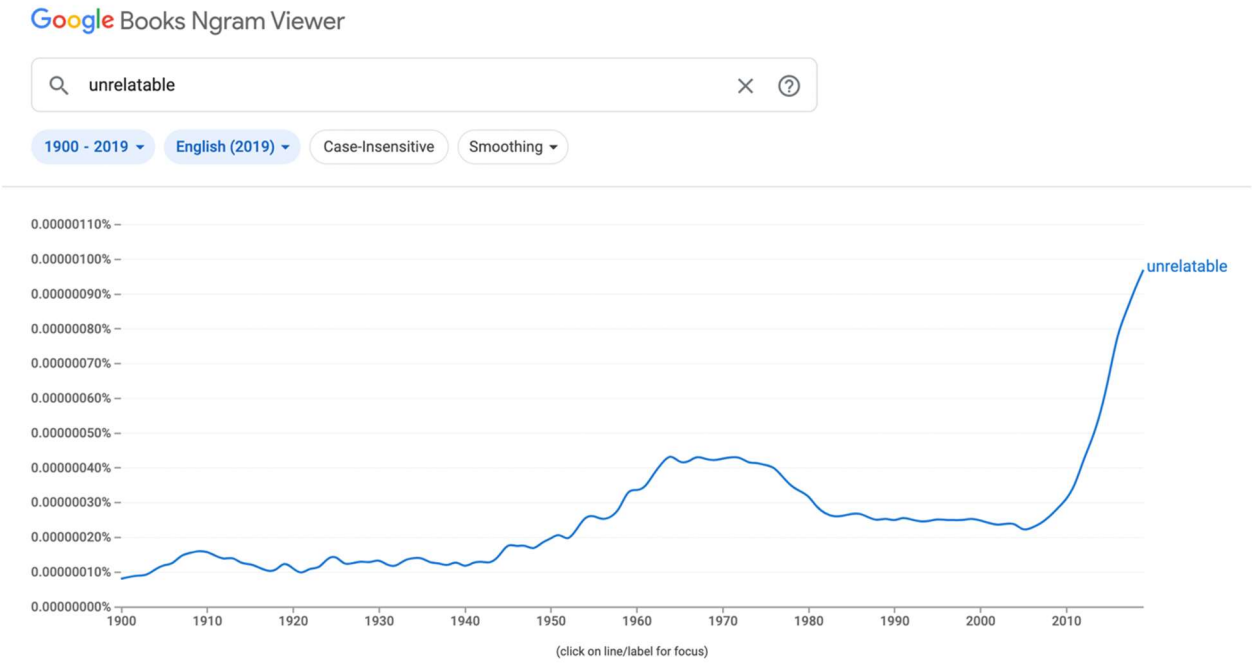

Fig. 2. Google Books Ngram for occurrences of "unrelatable" 1900-2019

As much as I try to teach students to use the more formal diction of "unsympathetic", the usage pattern for "unrelatable" indicates that the term is here to stay. In discussing the challenge posed by the unrelatable, I do not invite disparagement of those who use the term. As my comments above suggest, student readers encountering difference are not necessarily being self-centered or self-satisfied when they find a work unrelatable. In my view, we are better off directly addressing the frequency of this kind of response than suggesting that a perfected reading practice eschews the unrelatable.

Introspection leads me to disclose that I find some texts unrelatable, too. I am a formally trained literary critic and a lifelong novel-reader who takes great pleasure from a wide array of fictional works, including those created by writers from around the world. I confess that I sometimes struggle with work that challenges my ability to get past radical differences. For example, in 2018 I was reading a lot of novels and works of nonfiction narrative depicting torture, for a workshop on human rights. I had a lot of trouble with this reading. Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* (2004) and James Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) were familiar – I knew these works well, having taught them in the past. But two very powerful works, Mustafa Khalifa's *The Shell* (2008) and Maaza Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* (2010) – a memoir and a novel, respectively – challenged my ability to persist as a reader. I forged ahead in dutiful preparation for the workshop, but I did so with a resistance that sometimes tipped over into resentment. I felt this reading was poisoning my day, and I had to take care not to do it at night, after I found it disturbed my sleep.

Though I would express my reserve differently than student readers, I found many of these works both painfully empathetic and *unrelatable*. The painfully empathetic response was evoked by scenes that made me cringe or flinch: part of the discomfort of reading about torture comes from the involuntary sharing of feelings as a phenomenon of reading that I call narrative personal distress (NPD), an intense, aversive, self-focused form of narrative empathy[21]. But these works depicted misfortunes that were so far outside my experience as to be nearly unimaginable. I felt sympathy for the victims depicted in the novels (and in some complicated cases, as in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*,

[21] On narrative personal distress (NPD) as a variety of narrative empathy, see Keen (2018).

compassion for the perpetrators), but by and large these works were indeed unrelatable. I even felt that some works, in their effort to convey the physical and psychic experience of torture, verged on pornography, inviting an unhealthy fascination that also felt quite unrelatable, indeed repellant, to me.

Though sometimes, reading Danticat or Ngũgĩ, I was aware of the beauty of the writing and the skillful construction of the fictional worlds, I found the preparation for the workshop a hard slog, because the experience of reading what was happening to these bodies and minds (some of them belonging to real people's bodies and minds, survivors who had healed enough to write their stories), was excruciating and distressing: the opposite of immersive. The novels and memoirs seemed to be inviting me in only to repeatedly push me away. I made it through all the assigned reading, and I learned a lot, but because of the extraordinary privileges of my own life, I still found the narratives unrelatable, in exactly the way that my students use that term: beyond my experience, unrecognizable, even repellant. Obviously, it would be monstrous to wish that more people actually shared the experiences of victims of human rights abuses or cataclysmic misfortunes just so more readers could find these representations "relatable". So I cannot regard my response as anomalous or as a failure to read well just because I couldn't relate.

It would be reasonable to object that the writers of these narratives about torture weren't aiming for relatability: the goals of witness, of truth and reconciliation, and of legal deposition may not necessarily involve an appeal to recognition and shared humanity. Fritz Breithaupt has argued that a form of audience sadism may be involved in works that depict suffering; in order to recruit advocates who are rewarded by feeling pleasure at their supportive role, the suffering of the subject is sustained[22]. There are some very influential writers and thinkers – for example, Bertholt Brecht – who aim to move audiences *away from* their emotional responses in order to usher in cooler, more logical, rational responses[23]. Furthermore, some creators of stories, novels, or films seek an alternative emotional reaction from audiences, forgoing the rooting interests that piggyback on relatability. Finally, some writers exercising bounded strategic narrative empathy target a specific audience that excludes other readers not belonging to that in-group from the invitation to connect[24].

This phenomenon is perhaps most evident in works that we read decades, centuries, or millennia after their creation, as teachers of texts from the ancient world know from experience[25]. Centuries' worth of glosses, sermons, and homilies on ancient narratives suggest that even the most enduring stories have been perceived as requiring framing to align audience sympathies. In response to commentators who regard the relatable readers of this generation as an especially benighted group, I suggest that the historical record of guiding and channeling commentary on stories points to a similar variance in reception in the past. The interpretive instruction of didacts, when it places readers or auditors into position properly to relate to an authorized version and receive a canonical message underscores the variable impact of stories on actual audiences. The response of "unrelatable" may simply be a contemporary expression of a phenomenon as old as story itself – the listener to a fable who needs the moral spelled out; the reader of the parable who hears but does not comprehend; the imaginative mis-reader who turns an out-of-kilter response into a literary revision or a creative interpretation.

I insist: the reasons for such responses include both readers' contributions and authors' execution of their aims. If you have ever had the feeling of encountering a novel or a movie that seems perfectly fine, well-done, but just obviously not meant for you, you may not be part of that work's intended authorial audience[26]. You can still read it, but it's very likely

[22] On «advocative exploitative empathy», see Breithaupt (2017, trans. 2019), p. 189.
[23] Brecht and Bentley (1961).
[24] Keen (2006), p. 215.
[25] For more on this problem, Keen (2021).
[26] Rabinowitz (1987).

that you'll find it hard to relate to. As I have earlier observed: «For their part, authors and makers of narrative across media apparently differ in their ambition to evoke empathy from readers: some making it a priority and employing broadcast and ambassadorial strategic narrative empathy to assure empathic responses from as many readers as possible; some taking it for granted as they aim representations at a familiar in-group and employing bounded strategic empathy; and some swearing it off altogether, whether in pursuit of a more rational response, or aiming for discordant emotions such as disgust or shock»[27]. Some of the differences that we may observe about works that strike some readers as unrelatable originate with the differing aims of writers with respect to their audiences.

Readers themselves also vary in their personalities and dispositions – some people are high empathizers and some are low empathizers, individual differences that may impact their interest in engaging with imaginary worlds and their inhabitants. Does the relatively high or low empathetic capacity of readers intersect with their judgments about whether characters or stories are relatable? It seems quite likely. For example, consider Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003). It sympathetically depicts Christopher, a high-functioning autistic teenager. It would be interesting to discover whether low-empathy readers find Haddon's fictional character relatable in a way that high-empathizers do not. Christopher dreams of a world empty of other people, a chilling, even horrifying vision. But perhaps to a person whose nightmare is crowds of people, that very same passage could be especially relatable. Further study might reveal whether the co-creative imaginative work of readers can be prepared through pre-reading exercises, contextual information, discussion, or role-playing to better support sympathetic engagement that might make representations more relatable. These strategies might delay or interfere with the rejection of narratives as "unrelatable", or they might prove insufficient to overcome individual differences as a determinant of emotional engagement with fiction. Differentiating fictional works as if some of them are intrinsically *relatable* and some *unrelatable* leads fairly rapidly to judgements about the imaginative abilities or relative (im)maturity of readers who uphold or disappoint our expectations. Differences in disposition should not be understood as moral failings. Variations in readers' responses, set in relation to their emotional dispositions, should temper judgments about fictional works, authorial intentions, and co-creating readers.

We should also recognize that our own sympathetic alignments are conditioned by our education, identities, experiences, and politics. On the one hand, we tend to notice and denounce students' failure to empathize or relate when we are already politically aligned with or a share an identity with the maltreated subject represented in the fiction they disdain or dismiss. When the fiction enlists sympathy for an outgroup member that we condemn, on the other hand, then we hope it will *not* be found relatable, and some may even take steps to censor or suppress it. Whether a "relatable" response seems like a merit or a demerit always has to do with the object of representation; a reader who uncritically relates to every target is as grave a disappointment to a teacher employing improving reading as a reader who finds all subjects unrelatable. In my view, we ought to focus not on the reading response as a test of readers' right responses, but as an opportunity for opening conversations. I agree with David Palumbo-Liu's suggestion that «we should think of how literature engenders a space for imagining our relation to others and thinking through why and how that relation exists, historically, politically, ideologically»[28]. Palumbo-Liu's approach allows room for both the relatable and the unrelatable, prompting us to ascertain «how and why our relationship to others is not natural or immutable, but rather the result of a number of complex and often contradictory forces, some that draw us closer, others that drive us apart»[29]. To make the results of literary interventions on

[27] Keen (2017).
[28] Palumbo-Liu (2012), p. 14.
[29] *Ibidem*.

behalf of targets for empathy a litmus test of good or right reading skips over too much of the complexity of both narrative communication and of real readers' experiences.

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