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Narrative Agency and the Critical Potential of Metanarrative Reading Groups

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Abstract This article lays out the theoretical-analytic framework of narrative agency, three central dimensions of which are narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative dialogicality, and presents a model of metanarrative reading groups, which aims at amplifying narrative agency. It argues that an important form of self-reflexivity in contemporary literary fiction is metanarrativity — self-aware reflection not only on the narratives' own narrativity but also on the significance and functions of cultural practices of narrative sense-making. It analyzes how reading together metanarrative fiction, which critically engages with the roles of cultural narrative models in contemporary society, can shape narrative agency — that is, the ability to navigate narrative environments. The article illustrates the metanarrative reading-group model through the analysis of one reading-group session, which focuses on a metanarrative excerpt from Carol Shields's *The*

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Stone Diaries. The article suggests that a creative, dialogical space of a metanarrative reading group forms a productive environment for exploring the affordances, limitations, and power of narratives. It argues that working with narrative agency has the potential to help participants gain critical awareness of — and thereby more agentic power over — their narrative environments, and to engage with them in more critical and creative ways.

Keywords narrative agency, metanarrative fiction, reading groups, Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries*

Recent years have witnessed heated debates both on the health benefits of fiction and on the value and dangers of narratives. Because these two debates have remained largely separate from one another, there is a need to bring them into closer dialogue. The first debate, on whether literature is good for us, often draws on a rather narrow conception of well-being, understood in terms of individual psychology and individuals' feelings and moods. Well-being in a broader sense, however, is linked to implicitly social experiences: a sense of meaningfulness and agency that involves being part of dialogical relationships in which one is heard and seen.[1] The second debate has been notably polarized, divided between antinarrativist views of narrative form as inherently problematic (for example, because narratives allegedly impose a false sense of order on inherently incoherent and discontinuous stream of experiences) and narrativist views according to which narratives are in themselves good for us (for example, because narratives allegedly help us develop a sense of direction and purpose).[2] We aim to contribute to these debates by arguing that metanarrative fiction has the potential to enhance our narrative agency through its critical engagement with culturally dominant narrative models, and that such potential can be productively actualized in metanarrative reading groups. Our approach sees culturally mediated narratives as important to agency, and a fortiori to well-being in a broad sense, but does not take narratives to be inherently harmful or beneficial for us. Rather, we consider the meanings of narratives to be always contextual — formed in processes of interpretation and interaction — and hence the evaluation of narrative practices should be context-sensitive, attentive to how narratives function in spe-

[1] Arguments on the health benefits of fiction are presented in diverse fields ranging from empirical psychology (see, e.g., Kidd and Castano 2013; for critical discussion see Mäkelä and Meretoja, in this special issue, and Meretoja 2018) to sociologically informed research on reading for well-being (see, e.g., Brewster 2018a; Billington 2016). On the importance of the experience of meaningfulness for well-being, see, e.g., Antonovsky 1990.

[2] Examples of extreme antinarrativist and narrativist positions include, respectively, Strawson 2004 and MacIntyre 1984. On this polarized debate, see Meretoja 2014, 2018.

cific situations (Meretoja 2018: 170). In this article, we present a pilot study which examines how reading together metanarrative fiction, which critically engages with the roles of narratives in our lives and in contemporary society, can amplify our narrative agency — that is, our ability to navigate our narrative environments.

In the context of the current storytelling boom, narratives have acquired an increasingly prominent role in virtually all areas of our lives.[3] The notion of finding one's own narrative has pervaded culture at large, and it has been put to extensive commercial use. While recent story-critical discussions have highlighted problems of the current story economy in which emotionally appealing stories of personal experience distract us from structural problems in society, some strands of this discussion may have created the impression that narratives that focus on individual experience are inherently problematic.[4] However, there are also (individual-centered) narratives that offer complex critical reflections on the significance of narratives for the lives of individuals and communities, and arguably contemporary narrative fiction is a particularly rich domain of such reflections. So far, little attention has been paid to the ways in which contemporary fiction is responding to the storytelling boom through its critical engagement with the problematic aspects of the roles of narratives in our lives. While metafiction (Hutcheon 1980; Waugh 1984; Currie 2014) was a key characteristic of postmodernist literature, in the current age of storytelling, an important form of self-reflexivity in literary fiction is metanarrativity, which we define (following Meretoja 2014, 2018, 2022a) as self-aware reflection not only on the narratives' own narrativity but also on the significance and functions of cultural practices of narrative sense-making in our lives. There is a need for sustained research on how such metanarrative fiction participates, through its specific fictional means, in critical discussion on narratives. The critical potential of fiction, however, is only actualized in the process of reading. This centrality of reading prompts the question: what kind of reading could simultaneously foster critical awareness of problematic uses of narrative and acknowledge the specificity of fiction in dealing with the ways in which our being in the world is entangled with stories? What kind of potential for critical engagement with the storytelling boom does reading together in reading groups open up?

[3] On the storytelling boom, see Salmon 2010; Fernandes 2017; Meretoja 2018; Mäkelä et al. 2021.

[4] The most fervent antinarrativist positions usually draw on Galen Strawson's (2004: 447) polemical arguments (e.g., that narrative "almost always does more harm than good"); Maria Mäkelä and her coauthors present the more nuanced argument that "the prototypical story of personal experience and its potential for virality in social media networks" is inherently problematic (Mäkelä et al. 2021: 143).

In our research project Narratives, Reading, and Well-Being, we have explored ways in which metanarrative reading groups can contribute to a critical engagement with the current storytelling boom.[5] It is our hypothesis that reading together metanarrative fiction in reading groups can amplify the participants' narrative agency in ways that facilitate critical engagement with dominant cultural narrative models, and that this allows the participants to have more agentic power over their narrative environments. The project studies whether reading together metanarrative fiction can enhance different aspects of narrative agency: our awareness of cultural narratives that surround us, our ability to imagine different life trajectories, and our ability to engage in narratively mediated dialogical relationships with others. In this article, we present our new metanarrative reading-group model, and illustrate it through the analysis of one reading-group session. This is a pilot study that tests our theoretical-methodological approach through the example of a group that convened biweekly in the fall of 2019 and which, in the session we analyze, discussed a metanarrative excerpt from Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries*.

Narrative Agency and Metanarrativity

Our theoretical-methodological approach is narrative hermeneutics, which Hanna Meretoja has developed in her earlier work and in collaboration with the narrative psychologist Jens Brockmeier (Meretoja 2014, 2018; Brockmeier and Meretoja 2014).[6] Whereas in dominant forms of narratology narrative is seen as a textual representation of a series of events (as in structuralist narratology) or as a universal, ahistorical cognitive model (as in cognitive narratology), narrative hermeneutics understands narratives as cultural practices of sense-making that provide interpretations of being in the world. Meretoja (2018: 48) defines narrative as "an interpretative activity of cultural sense-making in which experiences are presented to someone from a certain perspective (or perspectives) as part of a mean-

[5] In the project, we have analyzed group sessions and interviews conducted with the participants before and after their participation in the reading groups. The group sessions were recorded, and the participants gave the research project texts written during the group sessions. The facilitators kept a facilitation diary. The participants also filled in the Ryff well-being scale (Ryff and Keyes 1995) and a questionnaire on narrative agency (designed by ourselves). The project, led by Hanna Meretoja, is part of the research consortium "Instrumental Narratives: Limits of Storytelling and Contemporary Story-Critical Narrative Theory" (Academy of Finland, 2018 – 22).
[6] Narrative hermeneutics draws on and further develops the Ricoeurean line of narrative studies (see Ricoeur 1983 – 85). See also Brockmeier 2016; Freeman 2015; Korthals Altes and Meretoja 2018.

ingful, connected account; it has a dialogical and a performative dimension and is relevant for our understanding of human possibilities." This approach draws attention to the existential significance of narratives: narratives are crucial to how we understand our possibilities in the world. It is hence integral to our agency, which we practice by navigating the narrative environments that shape how we perceive our possibilities — by following or challenging narrative models that are culturally available to us.

In addition to *explicit narratives* (narrative artifacts with a concrete textual form), there are *implicit narratives* that function as models of sense-making, and which underlie specific narratives but may not be anywhere available in a material form. These implicit narratives must be constructed by interpreters of explicit narratives; they are embedded within explicit narratives as what the latter resist or reinforce (Meretoja 2021, 2022b).[7] There are certain culturally dominant patterns of narrating different aspects of life. Such implicit cultural narratives provide models of what it means, for example, to live a good life, to be a good mother, or to go through illness or loss. They are models that largely affect us without our awareness but which nevertheless shape our actions, attitudes, and sense of what is possible for us as individuals and communities. In other words, our agency is narratively mediated: models of sense-making that are culturally available to us affect how we orient ourselves to the world and understand our place in it — that is, our sense of who we are and could be (Meretoja 2018: 11 – 21).

Meretoja's (2018, 2022a, 2022b) concept of narrative agency refers to our ability to navigate our narrative environments: to use, (re)interpret, and engage with narratives that are culturally available to us, to analyze and challenge them, and to practice agential choice over which narratives we use and how we narrate our lives, relationships, and the world around us. Previously, the notion has been used, particularly in philosophy, to foreground the role of narrative self-interpretation in bringing about "integration of the self over time" — a process that is "dynamic, provisional and open to change and revision" (Mackenzie 2008: 11 – 12).[8] However, the narrative dimension is arguably more broadly a constitutive aspect of our agency as we navigate our narrative environments and participate in narrative practices that perpetuate and challenge social structures. The concept of narrative agency signals that culturally mediated narrative interpretations play an important role in constituting us as subjects capable of

[7] While Matti Hyvärinen (2021: 20) suggests that "possibly (most) master-narratives are not narratives at all," Meretoja's concept of implicit narrative aims to articulate in what sense they are narratives (i.e., in the sense of functioning as narrative models of sense-making).

[8] Narratologists, in contrast, have traditionally referred to narrative agency in the context of the agency of narrators, not with reference to the agency of real-world subjects.

action, while simultaneously alerting us to the ways in which our narrative agency is socially conditioned. Narrative agency can be amplified or diminished, and agentic power is unevenly distributed both within societies and across the globe (Meretoja 2018: 11 – 12). Amplified narrative agency can manifest itself, for example, as enhanced awareness of one's possibilities of action, affect, and thought in relation to one's narrative environments, and as an ability to imagine different modes of living a fulfilling life.

In Meretoja's (2022a, 2022b) model, narrative agency has three central dimensions: narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative dialogicality.[9]

1. *Narrative awareness* means awareness of culturally available narratives that shape people's lives by functioning as models of sense-making. Cultural narrative models affect us whether we like it or not, and bringing them to the level of conscious reflection allows us to evaluate those narratives critically. Narrative awareness includes *self-understanding* with regard to the kinds of narratives we use in making sense of our lives, and *perspective awareness*, which entails awareness of how each narrative is told from a certain perspective and involves interpretation, selectivity, and meaning-giving. It is awareness of how each story can be told differently — from someone else's perspective, interpreted by someone else (Meretoja 2018: 98 – 107; 125 – 32).
2. *Narrative imagination* refers to our ability to imagine beyond what appears to be self-evident in the present, to creatively and critically engage with cultural narrative models, and to imagine different narrative trajectories for oneself, one's community, humankind, and the planet more broadly. The notion of narrative imagination has been discussed by several narrative scholars, from Jens Brockmeier (2009: 227), who links it to a creative "what if" dimension of our everyday practical actions, to Molly Andrews (2014: 7, 10), who describes imagination as a "social faculty" at work when "we think about our lives as they have been lived, and as they might be led." Mark Freeman (2014) associates narrative imagination with narrative reflection on the goals and objectives that direct one's actions, and with imagining one's future self — a self that will be or should be. For us, a central aspect of narrative imagination is our ability to cultivate our *sense of the possible* (Meretoja 2018: 90 – 97) — that is, our sense of how things could

[9] Meretoja has developed this model on the basis of her earlier work on the six evaluative continua of the ethically relevant aspects of narratives (see Meretoja 2018, 2021; also briefly presented in Mäkelä and Meretoja, in this special issue).

be otherwise as well as our sense of how different worlds function as spaces of possibility in which certain experiences, affects, thoughts, and actions are possible and others impossible or unlikely. Narrative imagination also involves the ability to engage in explorative *ethical inquiry* (Meretoja 2018: 133 – 42) about basic existential issues (e.g., of what good life might mean), issues that lack definitive answers but are crucial to how we orient ourselves in the world.

3. *Narrative dialogicality* refers to the narratively mediated process of how we become who we are in relation to other agents in the world — in a fundamentally dialogical and relational way. It means our ability to enter into a narratively mediated dialogue with others and their stories as well as with cultural narrative models. Critical engagement with normative cultural narratives of relationships and communities, which often draw problematic lines of division between "us" and "them," can open up new possibilities of relationality. The ability to enter into a genuine dialogue with others requires fundamental openness and responsiveness, as well as the courage to be exposed to the other and to let the other challenge one's preconceptions (Gadamer [1960] 1997: 362 – 75). Some narratives are particularly dialogical in that they invite us to understand the singularity of others' experience by functioning *non-subsumptively* (Meretoja 2018: 107 – 16): instead of subsuming the other under a pregiven mold, they function in an explorative mode to foster openness to what is unfamiliar, new, and unique in the experience of the other. Narrative dialogicality also involves the ability to participate in creating new *narrative in-betweens* (Meretoja 2018: 117 – 25), intersubjective spaces that make it possible for us to imagine new relationships and communities, and thus to create conditions for solidarity and social change.

While the model of narrative agency can be used to analyze any narrative, we are here particularly interested in the potential of metanarrative fiction to amplify our narrative agency, and we mean to explore the ways in which such potential can be actualized in metanarrative reading groups. To date, metanarratives have been studied from two perspectives that differ from ours. First, the term *metanarrative* is used in critical theory, particularly in connection to postmodernism, predominantly with reference to what Jean-François Lyotard (1979) called grand narratives (*grands récits*). In this context, it refers to master narratives that seek to offer legitimation through the anticipated completion of a master idea (typical examples are the narratives of Marxism and the Enlightenment). It is misleading, however, to call the Lyotardian master narratives "metanarratives" because

the prefix *meta*-suggests that they are narratives about narratives — that is, narratives that make narratives their theme.[10] Master narratives, in contrast, do not thematize their narrativity but, rather, mask it. Second, metanarrativity (or metanarrative commentary) within the context of narratology is understood as a phenomenon in which narrators reflect on their own process of narration (Fludernik 1996, 2003; Neumann and Nünning 2012; Macrae 2019).

These approaches to metanarrativity leave out two aspects of self-reflexive storytelling that we consider crucial. Metanarrativity is characterized by reflection, first, on the significance of cultural narrative practices for individuals and communities, and, second, on the functions of narrative processes in our social reality. Metanarrative fiction self-reflexively makes narrative its theme by reflecting not only on its own nature as a narrative but also, more broadly, on narrativity as a cultural phenomenon, on the significance and functions of narratives in our lives, and on the nature and conditions of narrative agency. It can provide critical insights with regard to dominant cultural narrative models that are imposed on us — on their normative and limiting aspects — and new resources for imagining different life courses as well as personal and collective futures.

There are many ways in which metanarrative fiction can be relevant to narrative agency. Such fiction can contribute to *narrative awareness* by encouraging us to critically reflect on the kinds of cultural narrative models that dominate in society. It can contribute to *narrative imagination* by helping us take critical distance from culturally available repertoire of narrative models and to find alternative ways of imagining different life trajectories and collective futures. It can contribute to *narrative dialogicality* by developing our ability to engage in a dialogue with others, to encounter other people as unique subjects, and to participate in constructing intersubjective narrative in-betweens that make possible new relationships and forms of solidarity.[11]

Whether and how the transformative potential of metanarrative fiction is actualized, however, depends on what happens in the encounters between readers and texts. In the discussions on the well-being benefits of literature, reading is usually understood as a largely solitary practice. Sociological and cultural studies- oriented approaches, however, have for some time observed changes in the reading culture. New forms of reading

[10] On narrative as theme in French fiction, see Prince 1992 (which focuses on issues of truth) and Meretoja 2014 (which focuses on the crisis and return of storytelling and their philosophical underpinnings).

[11] For examples of how metanarrative (auto)fiction can contribute to these three dimensions of narrative agency, see Meretoja 2022a.

together have complemented solitary reading. There is now empirical evidence of how reading groups can contribute to the well-being of the participants, particularly in relation to the British Shared Reading method,[12] but no study of reading groups prior to ours has engaged with issues of narrative agency. Our research aims to establish a new dialogue between reading research, narrative studies, and the study of well-being, as well as between the theoretical model of narrative agency and its practical applications.[13] While the model provides a theoretical ground for reading-group practices, the empirical findings can help to further develop and fine-tune the theoretical model. Similarly, theory and practice ideally inform one another when the model is used as an analytic lens in literary analysis.

Reading Metanarrative Fiction: Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries*

We will now briefly demonstrate how the model of narrative agency can be used in the analysis of metanarrative fiction. Our example is Carol Shields's (1993) novel *The Stone Diaries*, which tells the story of a character called Daisy Goodwill Hoad, from her birth to death, predominantly in the third person, but as the narrative progresses it becomes obvious that the narrator is Daisy herself. The narrator uses the third-person mode to gain distance from her own life and to perceive and evaluate it from the perspectives of multiple persons. Hence, although the narrative explores the role of the individual subject in narrativizing her life ("You can make of your lives one thing or the other" [116]), it makes clear that the individual does not carve her life into stories all by herself but does so in dialogue with others and in relation to the cultural narrative models that surround her. Our brief analysis of the novel here is meant to illustrate not only how the model of narrative agency can be used as an analytic lens for reading metanarrative fiction but also how metanarrative fiction provides insights relevant to the three aspects of narrative agency.

First, the novel promotes *narrative awareness* in multiple ways. The narrator-protagonist, Daisy Goodwill, is surrounded by narratives that limit her, particularly gossipy narratives that naturalize a certain story about her. She is aware of how narrative models that shape us are culture-specific and gendered: "Men, it seemed to me in those days, were uniquely honored by

[12] See, e.g., Hodge, Robinson, and Davis 2007; Longden et al. 2015; Gray et al. 2016; Pettersson 2018; Robinson et al. 2019. On the growing evidence base for using fiction as therapy and on the need for further research, see Brewster 2018a.

[13] Our reading-group model is meant to be widely applicable in libraries, schools, and other educational institutions, in the healthcare sector, and in bibliotherapeutic contexts.

the stories that erupted in their lives, whereas women were more likely to be smothered by theirs" (121). While narrative models culturally available to men often open possibilities for them, the ones available to women tend to leave less room for the unique individuality of women as persons: "The stories that happen to women blow themselves up as big as balloons and cover over the day-to- day measure of their lives, swelling and pressing with such fierceness that even the plain and simple separations of time — hours, weeks, months — get lost from view" (121 – 22). The narrator questions this injustice and asks, "Why should men be allowed to strut under the privilege of their life adventures, wearing them like a breastful of medals, while women went all gray and silent beneath the weight of theirs?" (121).

The narrator mentions examples of cases in which women have been reduced to a simple story. For example, "the famous Dionne quintuplets, born to an ordinary Canadian farm," have turned into "a story so potent and compelling that the little girls themselves are lost, and will always be lost, that's my opinion, inside its convolutions" (122). The narrator reflects on the unfairness of such a tendency to see women through a simple, shocking, emotionally charged storyline: "The unfairness of this — that a single dramatic episode can shave the fine thistles from a woman's life" (123). The novel as a whole promotes the readers' narrative awareness: it enhances our self-understanding by drawing attention to the culturally dominant narratives (e.g., linked to gender) that impose normative power on our lives, and it suggests that becoming aware of them can help us break free from some of those pregiven narratives. The novel also contributes to the readers' perspective awareness by drawing attention to the tension between (third-person) gossipy narratives and the complexity of (first-person) lived experience.

Second, with regard to *narrative imagination*, the novel emphasizes the role of gossip in shaping collective narrative imagination. The narrator conveys the idea that the social power of gossip is not just a women's issue, but concerns, rather, the more general problem that people have a tendency to reduce the complexity of an individual life to a simple, sentimental storyline. Through gossipy storytelling, Daisy is reduced to an anecdote about two dramatic episodes in her life: her birth process, during which her mother died, and her honeymoon, during which her husband died: "still living in the hurt of her first story, a mother dead of childbirth, and then a ghastly second chapter, a husband killed on his honeymoon" (122). The narrative template of a tragic loss of a loved one leads people to assume that she is traumatized or at least heartbroken: "Her poor heart must be broken, people say, but it isn't true" (122). The narrative of being traumatized by tragic loss diminishes her sense of the possible: "Yet wher-

ever she goes, her story marches ahead of her. Announces her. Declares and cancels her true self. Oh, she did so want to be happy, but what choice did she have, stepping to the beat of that ragbag history of hers?" (122).

The novel shows how Daisy feels smothered by being reduced to a simple story, but at the same time it makes clear that she is much more than her "story": "You might like to believe that Daisy has no gaiety left in her, but this is not true, since she lives outside her story as well as inside. . . . She's becoming more and more detached from her story's ripples and echoes and variations. Still, they persist. 'Isn't she the one who — ?' " (123 – 24). Daisy dislikes the story but recognizes her own complicity in it. She has stored in her stomach grief — not for her husband but "for what she allowed. For the great story she let rise up and swamp her" (125). This awareness, however, makes it possible for her to imagine other stories for herself, to envision a different life in which she is not defined by a limiting story and has a range of possibilities open for her. She embraces imagination as a mode of claiming agentic power over her own life: "She understood that if she was going to hold on to her life at all, she would have to rescue it by a primary act of imagination, supplementing, modifying, summoning up the necessary connections" (76). Eventually, the ability to exercise her narrative imagination prompts her to flee to a town where no one "knew her story" (133).

The narrator's narrative imagination significantly manifests itself in her ability to change the perspective, to observe herself both in the first and third persons, as a unique subject of experience but also from the outside, as a member of a broader community. This mode of narration engages readers in an open-ended ethical inquiry. Our narrative imagination, as readers, expands as the text invites us to reflect on the narratives that shape our lives and to consider how we might imagine our lives differently. The novel as a whole cultivates our sense of the possible by showing how the choices we make lead us to different life trajectories and how the ways we narrate our lives open and close possibilities for us.

Third, *narrative dialogicality* is a central aspect of the novel. Within the novel, gossipy oral storytelling, in particular, is a salient mode of social interaction. It functions as a form of social glue that does not foster an openness to the uniqueness of each individual, but rather excludes as much as promotes social cohesion. In this regard, Shields's novel has a story-critical dimension. Even though the text originally appeared in 1993, the way it thematizes the functioning of gossipy narratives affords critical insights relevant to the current storytelling boom, as it is precisely such easily shareable and tellable narratives, reducing individuals to anecdotes, that dominate in social media. At the same time, however, the novel shows how it is ultimately only through telling one's life story in one's own terms,

as Daisy does, that an individual can position herself in a critical dialogical relationship with socially dominant narratives (such as the constraining gossipy narratives) and thereby take the role of an active agent. While the dominant collective narratives lock Daisy within a story that separates her from others, the novel also affords Daisy the power to tell her own story. She does so in the third person, by looking at herself both from the perspective of her lived experience and from the perspective of the community, and thus succeeds in viewing herself as a character in the life of the community. The novel makes clear how narrative is ultimately a crucial means for us to tell others who we are. As the narrator renders to the readers Daisy's life story in its incompleteness, full of imaginings and fantasies, she notes: "Still, hers is the only account there is, written on air, written with imagination's invisible ink" (149). Telling the narrative of her life in all its ordinariness contributes to a *narrative in-between* that has the potential to make us more compassionate to the others' stories, more alive to their everyday struggles, hopes, and anxieties.

The form of Shields's novel is also saliently dialogical. Narrating Daisy's life in the third person provides the narrator with wider possibilities than would be afforded by a traditional autobiography to explore the multiple ways in which the life of an individual is entangled with the lives and stories of others, as well as within wider cultural narrative webs. Daisy's story is constantly in dialogue with other voices, reflections, and stories. Thereby the novel expands, through its form — that is, through different shifting narrative positions (including those of letters and photographs interspersed with the narrative) — into a reflection on the possibilities and limits of narrating life. In its kaleidoscopic, protean narrativity, it gestures toward the possibility to retell each life story from ever-new perspectives. *The Stone Diaries* thus can be seen as a reflecting stone mosaic that sheds light, in a multifaceted way, on the different aspects of narrative agency. It contributes to a narrative in-between characterized by critical awareness of the dangers of diminishing others through gossipy narratives and by a non-subsumptive aspiration to be open to the unique complexity of one another's storied experiences.

As we have seen, *The Stone Diaries* has a rich metanarrative dimension. This is why it was chosen as one of the texts discussed in the metanarrative reading groups. This highly self-reflexive novel invites readers to reflect on the relationship between life and narrative, on the significance and functions of narratives for individuals and communities, and on how individuals negotiate their lives in relation to cultural narrative models and collectively shared narratives. Metanarrative reading groups aim to create a

dialogical space in which the text's metanarrative potential can be actualized through a process of cointerpretation.

The Metanarrative Reading-Group Model

Our metanarrative reading-group model is based on the theoretical-analytic framework that we articulated above, principles of creative reading, and a specific structure of sessions that focus on a shared discussion on metanarrative fiction. The following creative reading-group guidelines have been modeled on creative group practices (see, e.g., Bolton 1999; Hunt 2013) and on creative and interactive bibliotherapeutic practices (see, e.g., Mazza 2017; Gray et al. 2016; Kosonen 2019b).

1. The structure of the reading group is set up in order to secure a safe and creative space for participants and facilitators;
2. the focus is on metanarrative fiction, which functions as an instrument and mediator for sharing reading experiences and is, due to its self-reflexivity, particularly well suited to discuss issues of narrative agency;
3. creative writing exercises support the participants' creative engagement with issues of narrative agency;
4. participants' individual experiences and personal agency are valued;
5. the sessions nurture a dialogical ethos that creates an accepting, affirmative atmosphere of togetherness;
6. the reading groups have the potential for change, but there is no pressure for change: rather than on accomplishing something, the focus is on evocative and meaningful experiences of reading that have the potential to cultivate our "sense of the possible" (see Meretoja 2018).

Creative reading groups are neither text analysis groups nor therapeutic groups, but rather structured reading groups in which participants share their reading experiences in facilitated group sessions that involve creative writing exercises. The creative space allows the participants to enter into a dialogue with the text, to allow themselves be affected by its evocative potential, and to verbalize how the events of the storyworld resonate with their individual life experiences, in dialogue with the experiences and responses of others. Focusing on literature, rather than directly on the participants' experiences, gives participants a medium in relation to which they can safely reflect on and process their experiences. The facilitator tries to nurture the participants' sense of the possible in relation to the possibilities and new directions opened up by the discussed metanarrative text.

Our research project studies how two different kinds of reading groups — basic creative reading groups and metanarrative creative reading groups — shape the participants' narrative agency. In both reading-group models, the creative reading principles and the structure of the sessions were alike.[14] In the first stage of the research, the main element differentiating the groups was the reading material: in basic creative reading groups, participants read narrative fiction, and in metanarrative reading groups, participants read metanarrative fiction. Moreover, in metanarrative reading groups, the facilitator not only took care of the creative space and the group dynamics but also gently directed the discussion toward issues relevant to narrative agency. At this stage of the research project the vocabulary of narrative agency was not used in the groups, as our starting-point was to draw on the critical potential of the texts themselves. However, as we will see, not only the discussed texts but also the group process and facilitating have turned out to be significant.

The creative reading-group sessions have the following structure: with the guidance of the facilitator, the participants tune into the creative space, work on and around the text, engage in a creative writing exercise, and participate in final reflection in which they write down and share meaningful moments of the meeting. In the tuning-in phase, the moment of settling down becomes a transitional ritual that creates safety. The tuning in (e.g., a writing exercise) helps participants to transition from everyday life into the creative, playful dialogical space of the reading group. For some sessions, literature (e.g., a whole novel) is read at home, while in some sessions a short story or an excerpt from a novel is read aloud by the participants, by taking turns, a practice which makes the text alive and present for the group.[15] In both models, the focus is on close and deep reading in which participants both pay detailed attention to the text and engage with it in ways that involve relating the text to their own personal experiences.[16] In the metanarrative creative reading groups, specifically metanarrative

[14] In the research project, we organized ten reading groups. Half of the groups were basic groups and the other half metanarrative groups. In forthcoming publications, we will compare how the two types of reading groups shape the narrative agency of the participants. This comparison is beyond the scope of the current article.

[15] The novels that the participants read at home included Jeanette Winterson's *Lighthousekeeping* and Siri Hustvedt's *A Summer Without Men*; the short stories and excerpts that were read aloud during the session included, in addition to the Shields excerpt, Lucia Berlin's "Point of View" and "Another Pamuk" from Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City*. Reading together aloud has been researched in Shared Reading studies (e.g., Longden et al. 2015).

[16] On deep reading, see Billington 2016. Close reading is also integral to narrative medicine; see Charon 2006.

questions are explored in the creative space of the groups, such as issues of how different cultural narrative models limit the characters or open up new possibilities for them. The idea is that metanarrative fiction critically engages with cultural narratives, and the facilitator draws attention to them and deepens the processing of these questions. In our metanarrative reading-group model, structured creative writing exercises provide an additional way to critically engage with cultural narratives and to widen and deepen the discussions that otherwise might focus exclusively on the themes of the discussed text.

At the end of the creative reading-group meetings, participants articulate, in a few words, what have been for them "meaningful moments" of the session. These moments might include, for example, affective aspects of the experience of participating in the reading group, or new insights about the possibilities or limits of narratives. We have observed that the participants tend to present their account of the meaningful moments in ways that foreground potential for change: they often bring up something that has provided them with new perspectives or insights, indicating some kind of change in thinking, mood, or orientation to certain aspects of their lives. There is no pressure to focus upon change in particular, but the collective creative process also has transformative potential,[17] including the potential to shape narrative agency, which we will next demonstrate through the discussion of a case study.

A Case Study: A Metanarrative Reading-Group Session

We will now briefly analyze one metanarrative reading-group session, in which the participants read aloud a fragment from Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries*, from the chapter "Love, 1936," which has a particularly rich metanarrative dimension.[18] While we earlier presented a literary analysis of Shields's novel, the analysis of a group session, in contrast, must also take into account the social dimension of the reading group. The example group consists of four health-care professionals (medical doctors and nurses); the group met seven times during the fall of 2019.[19] In the second

[17] On the transformative potential of reading literature, see Ihanus 2019; Kosonen 2019a, 2019b; Meretoja 2018; Tangerås 2018.
[18] The group read Shields in Finnish translation, and the group discussions were in Finnish.
[19] The participants were volunteers who wanted to participate in a reading group. We recruited participants from different organizations, including through student health care, cafes, a yoga studio, etc., and the groups took place in different settings. All the groups were open to adults regardless of age or gender. Some of the groups were directed to university

session, which we will analyze here, three out of the four members of the group and the facilitator were present. The two-hour session followed the reading-group model we outlined above.

As the group meets after a workday, the initial exercise ritual — in this session a writing exercise called "I today, on October 1, 2019" — helps the participants transition to the shared creative, dialogical space of the reading group. After this tuning in, the group reads the fragment from Shields by taking turns: the facilitator begins, the others continue. The facilitator first takes care to ensure that the group keep up with what is happening in the narrative. The text is not previously known to the participants, but it sparks a lively discussion right from the beginning, and the participants quickly begin to link the text's metanarrative reflections to their own experiences of narratives, life events, and their interconnections. The group consists of women, and they readily pick up the narrator's idea about the specificity of women's stories. Helena voices her experience of recognition, and she begins to reflect on how the text relates to her own life: "It's interesting. [She quotes:] 'The stories that happen to women blow themselves up as big as balloons.…' Somehow I recognize here myself, how I was married and had that everyday life, a small child and everything, and somehow it feels like it was just that kind of achievement-oriented life, no friends to share that with, and so it was a bit lonely too."[20] The group validates Helena's comment by mumbling approval. Then Janika returns to the text and picks up the question of Daisy's agency: "I don't know if this is connected to that or not, but I kind of thought about this first story [i.e., Daisy's mother's death] and that second chapter [i.e., Daisy's husband's death], so they are both the kind of things that are linked to other people and not to the protagonist herself, so, you know, *she* hasn't done anything but things have happened *to her*." The comment gestures toward the communal, dialogical way in which narratives take shape: we do not build our narratives autonomously and self-sufficiently; instead, they emerge in an intersubjective process in which contingent events and other people's interpretations of them play an important role. Translating the comment into the vocabulary of narrative agency, we can say that it reflects awareness of the *limits* of narrative agency. Pia, in turn, draws attention to all the "losses around Daisy." In this manner, the participants go back and forth between the text and what it evokes in them.

students, and some were open to everyone interested, regardless of educational background. The group analyzed in this article was the only group of health-care professionals.

[20] The participants' names have been changed. We have permission from all the participants to conduct this study and to publish this article. The quotations from the participants were originally in Finnish.

The facilitator searches for a balance between a free-floating discussion and a more directed kind of facilitating. At times, she asks about issues of narrativity directly and draws the group's attention to cultural narrative models, in the text and beyond it. For example, she asks about the anecdotal stories embedded within the main text:

> Facilitator: But what are they examples of? … Why are we being told the example of the Dionne quintuplets, and why does the narrator tell the incomprehensible story of Bessie Trumble? … What are they examples of?
>
> Janika: Well, I thought that it must be about the way people are so easily condensed into kind of one thing — like okay, they were the quintuplets, or okay she's that woman who lost a leg and she's the woman whose husband died.…
>
> Facilitator: Yes.…
>
> Janika: That's what we all do quite a bit, we talk about such and such a patient who has this and that, that they are that kind of type.

The direct facilitation works, and the group comes up with more examples of "narratives that define individuals," as Janika aptly puts it. The participants remember individuals whose lives have been condensed around a single event or chain of events: Anneli Auer (a Finnish woman who was charged with the murder of her husband), a survivor of the Estonia ferry disaster of 1994, the rap artist Cheek, Nelson Mandela. The group shows awareness of the power aspect linked to telling tragic narratives, and it engages in a long discussion on gossiping. Thereby the complex narrative pattern of the discussed text begins to unravel: that the narrator constantly brings "counter-light" to the dramatic narrative by interweaving it with other perspectives. Pia now points to the relativity of the truth of Daisy's story and to different possibilities of interpretation depending on who is telling: "Or is it gossip, that this is how people want to see it? But the truth can be different." The group also raises the question: can we ultimately ever fully know anyone? Janika disentangles from the narrator's discourse an alternative narrative model of survival:

> I haven't encountered exactly this kind of dramatic cases in my patients, but there are people who have gone through a terrible crisis and then it's clear that she will nevertheless make it, that she will get back on her feet.… It's precisely that, the way it's evident, just minutes after a crisis, that I will get through this, and so on, it's something like that, realizing that people do get through real tough things.

In Janika's account, the narrative of survival is cross-illuminated from many different directions. First, the individual story of survival is woven

together with a witness narrative of a health-care professional: "it's clear that she will nevertheless make it." The comment involves shifts of meaning that are interesting from the point of view of narrative dialogicality, in particular by way of a nuanced repositioning of the speaker's own narrative identity. Janika first aligns herself with the narrator's perspective and then shifts her perspective to her own life and to patients whose struggle through various crises she witnesses in her work: "She will get back on her feet." Janika uses indirect discourse and then moves for a moment in a personal register: "That I will get through this." In the end, Janika concludes with the generalization: "people do get through real tough things."

After the discussion, the session continues with a writing exercise: "Squashed by a narrative." It focuses on the quotation that we already discussed: "Yet wherever she goes, her story marches ahead of her. Announces her. Declares and cancels her true self" (Shields 1993: 122). First, the facilitator asks the participants to create a mental image of a real or fictional person in front of whom a narrative marches, and to write about that. In the second step, she asks the participants to imagine that the chosen character breaks free from the confines of the narrative. In the final step, the participants end their story.

After the writing process, the participants share experiences of the writing exercise. Two participants have chosen a public figure: Helena writes about Cheek, and Pia about Nelson Mandela. This leads the group to reflect on the relationship between a celebrity's public story and their private, personal stories. Janika writes about an anonymous patient who may say about their diagnosis: "This doesn't define me, I have much more." Janika's example takes the discussion in a personal direction. The participants indicate that this is an experience they share. Pia verbalizes it: "It must be like that, that each one of us has a story that presses us."

Overall, the participants engage in a rich discussion on issues relevant to narrative agency. Their narrative awareness and imagination manifest themselves through their understanding of the multiple perspectives from which things can be told. They also verbalize how imagining others' perspectives and not reducing others to mere "cases" are of utmost importance in their work as health-care professionals. Such understanding is also important in narrative medicine, but there is scope for it to expand in the direction of critical engagement with cultural narrative models, reflection not only on how narratives enable understanding but also on how they can limit or diminish us.[21] Narrative medicine operates with the con-

[21] See, e.g., Charon 2006; Brewster 2018b.

cept of narrative competence, which overlaps with our notion of narrative agency, but the concept of narrative competence lays the emphasis on analytic skills (i.e., the ability to analyze narratives), and hence it has the air of a certain detachment from the object of analysis, whereas narrative agency explicitly emphasizes relationality, engagement and involvement in the social world, acting in the world with others. We suggest that these concepts complement one another and that the model of narrative agency could be used to develop narrative medicine in new directions.

The Question of Definitional Power in the Dialogical Space of the Group Process

Toward the end of the session, the discussion of Daisy's story leads the group to a situation that makes visible certain challenges in reading-group facilitation. While it would appear that the group has advanced in its narrative awareness, and we might thus be tempted to draw the conclusion that the narrative agency of the participants has developed during the session, things turn out to be more complicated.

In addition to the gendered aspects of stories, the group discussed generational and age-specific experiences. The temporal marker in the chapter's title, "Love, 1936," invites such consideration. Daisy's story is narrated by a fictional autobiographical narrator, Daisy as an adult, who places her current perspective above that of her past self — "a young Bloomington widow" (Shields 1993: 122) — and underlines how young Daisy was and how limited her understanding. The narrator refers to (gendered) attitudes that prevailed "back in the year 1936" (121) and suggests they have now changed. In the group discussion, Daisy's "young age" is foregrounded, linked to her limited perspective. The participants characterize her as "really young," a "twenty-year- old." When the meanings of youth are discussed, the group refers to progressiveness but also to thoughtlessness. They also mention the narrator's conception of a mistake that Daisy made as a young woman. Toward the end of the session, Janika insists on the issue of age:

> To be honest, I have to confess that I didn't think of this person [Daisy] as young and ignorant, [laughs] because somehow I just don't think about people in that way.… Because I'm myself in that situation, so I don't… I find it funny, somehow funny to hear what other people think, what young people are like and so on… because I can't think like that myself, that other young people are like that…

Janika is herself young in the reading group of middle-aged women, and her comment foregrounds the difference of her own way of thinking from

that of the other group members. She has not interpreted Daisy's love story as a "youthful mistake," and feels as if the other participants are reducing Daisy to one story, linked to her youth: "So that she's young in that way and that's the kind of things the young do . . . that they can't know what they do — oh, okay, really?" Janika criticizes the group in a gentle tone, but at the same time asserts her desire to defend herself against the definitional authority of the group: "Something this dramatic happens to few of us, having this clear a story, but then in the end there's still something that others take to be a factor that defines me, even when I don't necessarily know myself what it is." She thus applies the analytic lens of narrative agency to the group process by drawing attention to the way narrative power works and how it takes place in the group too; it is something she experiences right here and now. The tendency to reduce people to a single story easily happens without anyone even noticing it.

At the end of the session, in the "meaningful moments" exercise, Janika returns to the issue of categorizing people: "I think this awakened in me a kind of compassion or something like that, that I should remember that there's no need to assume or judge, to lock up people in boxes, and perhaps we should just let them tell their own stories and then go with that." At this stage, the facilitator feels a need to validate Janika's generational perspective more emphatically and to apologize that Janika ended up feeling that the group defined her one-dimensionally as just a young person.

The issue is resolved in the group discussion, but it reminds us of how fragile creative reading-group dynamics can be in their situated, shifting now-time. It also demonstrates how reading-group activity builds narrative dialogicality on a practical level so that, in the group, the issue of how narratives define us emerges as a concrete question that applies to the group's own dynamics as well. Hence, narrative agency is not only about the text but also about the dialogical relations among the participants.

Final Reflections on Navigating Narrative Environments

At the end of the session, the facilitator guides the participants through a final writing exercise that provides them a chance to reflect on how the discussion has affected the way they think about the role of narratives in their lives. Afterward, group members share their thoughts. They all bring up, in different variations, the idea that they now think differently about narratives: Pia says, "I have never really thought that they [narratives] have such a determining role…that they even define your person.… They have quite a major significance.… In a way people are a bundle of different narratives." Others feel that Pia's remark encapsulates their experi-

ence too: Janika says, "You managed to say what I couldn't put in words"; "Mine were just vague formulations, but what Pia said is just so true," adds Helena. This interchange demonstrates how shared interpretations take shape in a dialogue in which sharing experiences can help individual participants verbalize their own experiences.

In the final round, the participants also articulate a sense of agency and empowerment that they associate with the effects of the creative group process (without specifically linking it to aspects of narrativity). Janika, for example, expresses a sense of moving from feeling "tense," burdened by "everything I should do," to feeling affirmative about carrying out the things she wants to do. Helena says: "I have really missed something like this," and she refers to "a space of peace" in the group and to how she now feels "invigorated like after a singing lesson." Pia notes how "writing and concentration, after initial difficulties, somehow just take off": "It's surprising how it just takes off." Discussing the group process is itself part of the process of practicing narrative agency in dialogue with others — narrating what happened and what it means. Such a practice also works to build a narrative in-between in which it is possible to continue discussing issues of narrativity in a safe, creative space.

After the reading group finished, the participants were interviewed in semi-structured interviews in which they were asked about the reading-group experience, whether it changed anything in their lives or about the way they think about narratives. The final interviews show that after participating in the reading group the participants reflect, from new perspectives, on issues of narrative agency.

In comparison to the initial interviews, the participants express more nuanced *narrative awareness*, particularly about different kinds of narratives, their affordances and risks. They go through different types of narratives: Helena says, "There are so many different kinds of stories. There are stories in which you are thrown by chance, there are stories of development, there are adventure stories." Janika draws a distinction between the dominant cultural model of a "survival story," which is told from a perspective defined by a happy end, and stories of "real people" who post — for example, as YouTube videos — alternative "coping stories," in which "not everything has to be like this is over now but they can be about what's going on right now, that it's difficult now.… That has made it easier to tell unpleasant stories, too, that it doesn't have to be just survival stories so that now [all the difficulties are] over and my life is better than ever, but they are really the kind of stories that now it's hard and please try to understand." Pia says that attending the reading group made her more aware of the stories she encounters in her work: "I'm surrounded by sad stories."

She has found, however, a new approach to that sadness, not just being horrified by it but trying to see how they can work on it together through a reparative approach: "Bad things have happened and they can't be taken away, but much can be done, repaired."

In terms of *narrative imagination*, all the participants express the idea that narratives can help imagine others' experiences and new possibilities. Janika reflects on how reading helps understand that "there is not just one truth, there are different possibilities and perspectives.… One does not need to experience everything by oneself in order to understand." She mentions specifically the "exchange of perspectives" as valuable, as something that helps gain distance from one's own life and imagine different experiences, and she asserts that narratives can function as "a means of understanding the self and others." Helena reflects on how different life stages and personal experiences offer different perspectives on the same text: "That's precisely the brilliance of it." Pia suggests that medical doctors should read more fiction because it helps imagine situations different from one's own: "it opens up the world in quite a different way. They [literary narratives] can function as a mediator of feelings, like this is how I would feel, it can verbalize those feelings and situations." Interestingly, two of the participants also draw attention to the *limits* of agency in envisioning new directions for one's life. Pia reflects on how we can affect our life stories to some extent with our own actions even as there remain limits to such control: "It's also the case that things just happen to us, and that's what's difficult: when you can't control everything. In a way it's best not to try to control everything — what comes, comes, and we have to take it." Helena ponders whether her work is what she wants to do for the rest of her life, and continues: "On the other hand, it's life, whatever will happen. You can't control life, can you."

Most empathically, however, the participants voice insights linked to the aspect of *narrative dialogicality*. All of the participants emphasize the significance of reading together, togetherness — "a sense of community," as Pia says. Helena feels that "unraveling the text together" created a sense of the multifacetedness of it and ignited in her a desire to reread it (she refers particularly to Jeanette Winterson's *Lighthousekeeping*). The interviewer never directly asks about the perceived well-being benefits of the reading group, but interestingly all the participants nevertheless connect it to well-being, which they link to the experience of sharing reading experiences.[22] It is

[22] Further research is needed to establish whether the perceived well-being (such as feeling reinvigorated) emerges from the participation in reading groups in general, or whether it is linked to metanarrative groups in particular. Our initial analysis suggests the former, but it also suggests that metanarrative groups significantly contribute to well-being, understood in the broader sense that our notion of narrative agency articulates.

possible that this well-being perspective emerges from their background in the health-care sector. Janika compares the reading group as a hobby to yoga: for her, "it goes in the same well-being category" in its ability to help the participants take a pause and connect with themselves. When asked whether the group changed anything for her, Janika says, "Of course I hope that I have grown as a person and am now much smarter and better, but perhaps I'll just say that I'm now reinvigorated." Helena compares the reading group to singing in a choir: it has similar changes of rhythm; it is "lively and feels real." She says it has "opened up some emotional locks" for her. Pia considers reading together "a kind of spiritual sports" and emphasizes the significance of "commonality," "togetherness."

The interviews suggest that metanarrative fiction provides critical resources for engagement with the current storytelling boom. As we observed above, many of the metanarrative insights of *The Stone Diaries* are relevant for analyzing problems in the twenty-first- century storytelling boom, characterized by gossipy narratives that circulate in the social media and reduce individuals to easily shareable and tellable anecdotes. Both Janika and Helena explicitly reflect on social media narratives, raising questions about what kind of stories people share and how these platforms affect us. Janika, for example, analyzes commercially motivated stories that people share in social media and which "do not create any sense of conflict." She reflects on the tension between the way news stories portray the world as heading toward annihilation and the way social media is full of stories like "Look at my new high-heels." Such reflections express the participants' awareness of the types of narratives that impede our ability to imagine the complexity of real everyday experience, and it problematizes the kind of narrative in-between that commercially driven social media creates.

Overall, our initial analysis of the whole reading-group data indicates that most participants of the metanarrative reading groups have become more aware of the roles of cultural narratives in their lives. This narrative awareness aspect of narrative agency emerges most readily from the final interviews, whereas the two other aspects of narrative agency raise more questions of interpretation. Thus, metanarrative reading groups seem to have a particularly significant potential to amplify the participants' narrative awareness but can be seen to contribute to the other two aspects as well. The enhancement of the latter two can be seen, for example, as we saw in the analysis of our case study, in the participants' tendency to

emphasize the ways in which listening to others' points of view and attending to the facilitators' questions that guided the discussions toward issues of narrativity enriched their own reading experiences and their sense of different possible perspectives on the discussed themes. This interestingly raises the question of how the different aspects of narrative agency lend themselves to observation and interpretation through different research methods.[23] Overall, our analysis suggests that while each of the metanarrative reading groups has its specific group process, the data consistently supports the conclusion that narrative agency is shaped, and can be enhanced, through the dialogical group process, and that metanarrative facilitation plays an important role in contributing to the amplification of the three dimensions of narrative agency.

Conclusion

In this article, we have laid out the theoretical-analytic model of narrative agency, shown how it can be used in the analysis of metanarrative fiction, and discussed the potential of metanarrative reading groups to shape the narrative agency of the participants. While metanarrative fiction in itself draws attention to issues relevant to narrative agency, these issues gain meaning through a process of interpretation, which is a fundamentally dialogical process. In the groups, the richness of the discussion relevant to narrative agency depends not only on the text but also on the modes of facilitation and on factors specific to each group, such as group dynamics and how each session unfolds through the interaction of the participants.

Our analysis suggests that metanarrative fiction provides significant critical resources for engagement with the current storytelling boom. The example of *The Stone Diaries* highlights how gossipy narratives can diminish an individual to a simple anecdote. The pressure to mold our lives into easily shareable, tellable, and sellable stories can be seen as a key characteristic of the current storytelling boom; hence, the novel's insights on problematic forms of narrative relationality are valuable for our critical engagement with our current cultural condition. The novel also shows how multidimensionally metanarrative fiction can deal with the significance of narratives for individuals. It presents individuals' critical engagements with their narrative environments as ambivalent, fragile, lifelong processes in which situations and perspectives constantly shift.

[23] We will return to this question and report more detailed results from the whole research project in later publications.

This pilot study has suggested that a creative, dialogical space of a metanarrative reading group forms a productive environment for exploring the affordances, limitations, and power of narratives. It allows a critical approach to the narrative environments in which the participants find themselves without losing sight of personal engagement with the lively presence of literature that moves them and matters to them. This is the challenge and subtlety of the model: how to foster personal engagement and interpretative freedom while at the same time encouraging critical engagement with problematic aspects of narratives in the current cultural moment. Our research on the reading groups suggests that this kind of combination of critique and personal engagement can foster shared verbalization of interpretations in ways that have the potential to contribute to narrative agency in a multifaceted way, in a shared space of critique, creativeness, and relationality — that is, in relation to awareness, imagination, and dialogicality.

Our understanding of how metanarrative reading groups can shape narrative agency will develop further as our research project moves on to compare the various groups with one another. Much work remains to be done before our findings can be established conclusively; for example, they need to be tested with a broader range of reading groups involving participants from more diverse backgrounds. Although it is not possible to draw wide-ranging conclusions from one session, there are certain elements in the session that can be interpreted as signs of strengthening narrative agency. Our analysis suggests that working with narrative agency has the potential to help participants gain critical awareness of — and thereby more agentic power over — their narrative environments, and to engage with them more creatively through critical dialogue. We have indicated how critical reflection and creative engagement can come together in a group process that can support critical engagement with problematic aspects of the storytelling boom and strengthen the participants' narrative agency — that is, their ability to navigate their narrative environments in more critical and creative ways. The model of narrative agency allows approaching well-being in broader terms, with an emphasis on experiences of meaningfulness, a sense of one's possibilities, and the relationality of our being.

This article has highlighted one of our main research findings so far: the importance of facilitating in order to open up the metanarrative dimensions of the texts for the participants. In the analyzed session, the facilitator did not explicitly use the vocabulary of narrative agency, because our idea was that the facilitator should only gently draw attention to the ways in which metanarrative fiction itself critically engages with practices of narrativizing lives. During the research process, however, we have come

to think that the theoretical model of narrative agency could be used as an explicit analytic lens that can contribute to the participants' narrative agency: providing them with this vocabulary could itself increase their self-reflexive abilities and give them tools to reflect on the various dimensions of their narrative agency. In line with this insight, we have developed the metanarrative reading-group model toward a narrative-agency reading group that involves explicitly working on the three dimensions of narrative agency. Further research is needed, but we believe that this opens one meaningful direction for narrative studies in the era of the current storytelling boom: to provide tools and vocabularies that have the potential to amplify, in dialogical processes of cointerpretation, the critical potential of narrative fiction in its engagement with the affordances and risks of various narrative practices.

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