

Reading in changing society

STUDIES IN READING AND BOOK CULTURE 2

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Edited by

Marju Lauristin and Peeter Vihalemm



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Introduction

Marju Lauristin, Peeter Vihalemm

The changing state of reading and its fate in the digitalised world is one of the core issues in the contemporary debates about the future of culture. The central position of the printed word, and primarily, books as the most valuable cultural medium and the main source of knowledge, are becoming questioned in the age of the Internet. Reading as gateway to the world of fantasies has been challenged by powerful audiovisual media. Is the pleasure of reading as a creative process involving imagination and self-cognition disappearing, and being replaced by the quick exchange of impressions and images in social media? Are these critical notes and concerns about the future of reading just rapid generalisations and misunderstandings, evoked by the invasion of new technologies in the old and well-established world of books? Or are there more serious reasons for speaking about the cultural changes occurring not only in the world of books, libraries and classrooms, but also in the ‘real world’ of politics, economics and the practical everyday life of people?

These issues were discussed during the Baltic-Nordic conference called *Reading in a Changing Society* organised by the Institute of Journalism, Communication and Information Studies of the University of Tartu and by the University of Tartu Library on 31 October to 1 November 2013. Some of these discussions are reflected in this collection of articles, which are based on the conference papers.

The articles represent empirical studies, theoretical and historical reflections on the changes in the world of books and reading in the Baltic and Nordic countries, as well as descriptions of the new library practices that reflect the creative efforts to adapt to the changing social and technological environment. Looking at the diversity of the content and approaches, the book is divided into five sections: *Books and Reading Culture*, *Books and Readers*, *Reading in the Digital Era*, *Reading Policies*, and *Library Practices and Experiences*.

Contemplating the current trends in reading culture, in the opening article ‘*Reading like monks: Death or survival of the love of reading?*’, Ilkka Mäkinen asks if the traditional love of reading, with the reader immersed in the world

of a long text, is dying in the contemporary world? He emphasises that this is not the first time that we have faced a crisis in reading. He seeks parallels for today's situation in the history of reading, and asks what lessons we can learn from this.

The article by Kurmo Konsa and Edith Herman 'The logic of text and structure of books: Changing the function' focuses on the conceptualisation of the changes in the informational structure of books in contemporary society. The authors distinguish three different informational levels of books: structural properties, functional properties, and the context of books, which are changing in time, especially as the traditional communicative functions of books are being co-opted by electronic media.

The second section of the book presents the results of empirical research on book consumption and readers. Peeter Vihalemm's article 'Changes in the character of book consumption in Estonia, 1979–2011' investigates how the level and character of book consumption has changed in Estonia over last 30 years, based mainly on the results of representative sociological surveys conducted by the Institute of Journalism and Communication at the University of Tartu. A survey is provided of the very active book buying and reading of Estonians in the 1970s and 1980s; the sharp decline after the restoration of independence in 1991; and the contemporary trends until 2011. The article provides some explanations for these changes – after the restoration of independence and the establishment of 'normal capitalism', and the emergence of an information and consumer society, cultural mechanisms were activated that had characterised the Western countries for 30 years – a strong differentiation between elite culture and popular culture, and a general decline in book demand.

Marju Lauristin's article 'Reading as lifestyle' is also based on the results of sociological surveys conducted by the Institute of Journalism and Communication at the University of Tartu. The analysis is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of social and cultural stratification and by the analysis of patterns of cultural consumption in contemporary UK by Tony Bennett et al (2009). In Lauristin's analysis of the empirical data about the linkages between book consumption and more general lifestyle characteristics, she has applied similar multidimensional approach to the cultural field, comparing the levels of active cultural participation and selectivity of book preferences with the status- and gender-related patterns of lifestyles, as well as with generational differences. The article presents the results of the factor analysis of book preferences and the typology of reading-related lifestyles, also a comparison of the structures of reading-related lifestyles in 1990 and 2011. One of general conclusions of this comparison is that, despite the overall decline in the average amount of reading in Estonian society after the 1990s, the structure of reading-related lifestyles has not radically changed, but has become more diverse and gender-balanced.

Mara Grudule and Ojars Lams's article 'Reader in the clash of cultures: Experience in Eastern Latvia (Latgale cultural region) 2009–2011' introduces Latgale as one of four historical and cultural regions of Latvia with a large number of Russian speakers. Although most of the population today speaks Latvian and/or Russian, the region can be characterised by strong Latgalian cultural traditions. The article is based on a three-year expedition in three districts of Latgale and on the observational data gathered about the book and periodical reading interests of the local population, their language abilities, home libraries, literary taste, etc.

The third section of this volume analyses the impact of digitalisation on the young generation's reading habits and preferences. The article by Juha Herkman and Eliisa Vainikka entitled 'New reading' or communication? Finnish students as readers in the age of social media' investigates how the idea of the 'digital revolution' challenges contemporary conceptions of reading. This article explores the contemporary media use and reading habits of Finnish students, who can be described as representatives of the 'Net Generation'. However, the analysis is focused on the older age group of students, aged between 18 and 30, who can be seen as a transition group between the younger 'digital natives' born with social and ubiquitous media and the older generations of 'digital immigrants', more familiar with print and broadcast media. The information presented in the article, based on the results of an empirical study, confirms this assumption. Although young adults spend a lot of time with short text forms for interpersonal and peer communication, they have not abandoned the reading of professionally produced texts, and still appreciate printed text forms, especially books.

Skans Kersti Nilsson's article 'Reading in a changing society: Some impact in the Swedish context' focuses on how young Swedish adults, 15 to 25 years old, express their thoughts on reading narrative fiction in printed books and in digitised formats. Nine focus groups were conducted, which were comprised of students from the theoretical and practical classes in upper secondary school and pupils from the folk high school. A kind of consensus in defence of reading printed books was evident. The results showed that digital reading does not pose a threat to reading narratives in printed books, and books as artefacts are not threatened by e-books.

The fourth section of the anthology is related to the reading policies in different societies at various times. Krista Lepik's starting point is the Foucauldian analysis of governmentality, which she used to analyse the present-day controversies in Estonian cultural policy. Her article 'Reading policy and public libraries in Estonia – from the perspective of Foucauldian analytics of governmentality' discusses the role of Estonian public libraries as facilitators and promoters of

readership and questions the intervention of the state into an intimate sphere like the reader-book relationship. Since 2012, the Ministry of Culture has issued lists of 'officially favoured literature' to instruct professionals in public libraries regarding the purchase of books for the funds allocated by the state. The issue of spending the taxpayers' money effectively may have an impact that reaches far beyond the calculations in the cultural budget. The forcible enactment of a reading policy that only considers a few circumstances (cost benefit, national aims, etc.) may potentially be at cross purposes with its goals. As such, the idea of promoting best works of Estonian writers to Estonian readers may be a good cause, but the implementation of this idea can be questioned and serve as a lesson for similar enterprises in the future.

The article by Mats Dolakthah and Anna Hampson Lundh, entitled 'Reading, democracy and discipline: Reading practices in Swedish primary school classrooms 1967–1969', provides an interesting historical parallel with the contemporary efforts of the Estonian government to control the reading tastes of the public. The article reports on an ongoing research project investigating the reading culture in Sweden after World War II. The project is based on a large collection of sound and video recordings made in Swedish primary school classrooms in 1967 and 1969. Sweden established a system of nine-year comprehensive and compulsory primary schooling, including the teaching of reading, in 1962. The main mission of this new system was to foster an independent, democratic citizenry, but recent research in educational history has suggested that it also developed a subtle, sophisticated and far-reaching disciplinary regime. However, research often assumes that the promotion of reading among children and young people works best if a voluntary spirit and individual freedom prevail in connection with the reading activities, and a feeling of compulsion is avoided. In upcoming papers, the authors will explore the reading practices as they were enacted and the field of tensions that exist between the institutional ideologies of the new comprehensive school system, and the children and teachers as individuals in particular situations.

In his article, 'Library lists and directed reading. Some episodes in the history of Estonian libraries', Asko Tamme's aim is to analyse the role of lists of recommended reading in Estonian librarianship, starting with the list published in the weekly newspaper *Olevik* in 1882 and ending with the introduction of systematically prepared lists in the late 1920s. The author is interested in the triangular power relations between the state/public sphere, libraries and reading. The author's hypothesis is that an analysis of the introductory and explanatory texts included with the recommended reading lists provide enough information to describe the general framework of the views, expectations and presumptions of the different parties, the functional forms they have taken, and the dynamics inside the triangular power scheme.

Helin Puksand's article 'The reading preferences of Estonian adolescents' provides a brief survey of the empirical data related to the extracurricular

reading habits and preferences of Estonian adolescents and confirms the educational importance of school reading lists. The results of the survey, which studied the reading preferences of students in the 9th and 11th grades were analysed in 2008 and 2009. The overwhelming favourite was *Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling, but many books from the school reading lists were among the favourites: *Truth and Justice* (by A. H. Tammsaare), *Crime and Punishment* (by Fyodor Dostoyevsky), *A Doll's House* (by Henrik Ibsen), *Anna Karenina* (by Lev Tolstoy), *Bye, Yellow Cat* (a youth novel by Mati Unt), *Eugene Onegin* (by Alexander Pushkin), *The Lord of the Flies* (by William Golding), *The Master of Kõrboja* (by A. H. Tammsaare), and *The Old Man and the Sea* (by Ernest Hemingway).

The last section of this volume consists of four articles on library experiences and practices. Olga Einasto's article "Time is out of joint": A postmodern approach to libraries' stresses that the development of libraries has always been related to the evolution of data carriers. However, twice in history, this process has been revolutionary: in the 15th century after the invention of the printing press, and in the 20th century once information could be saved and accessed electronically. In our libraries today, modern principles (i.e. valuing and preserving the printed word, order in organising catalogues and collections) and postmodern principles (i.e. pluralism, variety, virtuality, disappearance of barriers, and the participation of the reader) have merged. A postmodern library is a creative mix of old and new, of tools and resources, which blends digital and printed books with staff expertise in new and ever-changing arrays.

Triinu Seppam's article 'E-books in the Tallinn Central Library: First experiences' describes the introduction of e-book lending at the Tallinn Central Library on 1 February 2012. Krista Kiisa's article 'Exciting reading from the past: archiving and usability of periodicals stored in the National Library of Estonia digital collections' describes the experience of working with current and old periodicals in the National Library, and disseminating their contents via the library's digital archive DIGAR. The rapid development of informational technology undoubtedly offers new directions for the development for libraries, but it also results in a need to find new ways of communicating with the potential readers. Ilona Smushkina and Elena Sipria-Mironov's article 'Literary Festival Prima Vista – The message delivered by libraries in space and time' describes the Prima Vista literary festival, which has been organised by the University of Tartu Library every spring since 2004.

The Baltic-Nordic comparisons presented in this book show that, despite the historical and political differences, many parallel developments exist that are related to the worlds of books and reading around the Baltic Sea. Some of these trends, which got their start in the Nordic countries already in 1960s and 1970s,

have now also reached the other side of the Baltic Sea. Some of these trends are new and caused by the technological revolution, and this also affects the fate of books throughout Europe in quite a similar manner.