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A Box for 'Bad Readers'? Bookish Gifts in Subscription Book Boxes

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Abstract
Subscription book box services are currently booming. The curators of the *Once Upon a Book Club* box promise their readers to "bring books to life" by compiling a monthly book subscription box with story-related gifts. Referring to concepts by Merve Emre (the paraliterary), Marie-Laure Ryan (immersion) and Arthur M. Jacobs/Raoul Schrott (NCPM), this article will first develop an idea of the (allegedly) 'bad reader' and then explore why this type of reader is the ideal customer for *Once Upon a Book Club*. The focus of the analysis lies on the role of the gifts as paraliterary objects and the question of how they can facilitate immersive processes and therefore foster the practices of paraliterary reading.

Keywords Subscription · Book box · Paraliterary · Gifts · NCPM · *Once Upon a Book Club*

Introduction: A Box for the 'Bad Reader'?

Once Upon a Book Club promises its readers: "Bringing Books to Life, Monthly"—a big promise to give to a reader. In the following paper I will take a closer look at this statement by examining the ideas about reading which form the foundation of such a promise.

The paper builds on two concepts: First, the notion of the 'bad reader' and the corresponding paraliterary reading practices discussed by Merve Emre in her monograph *Paraliterary. The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (2017). Second, Arthur M. Jacobs' and Raoul Schrott's Neurocognitive Poetics Model (NCPM 2011), a model for mapping the mental processes involved in reading literature. Tying ideas from Emre and Jacobs/Schrott together, I will develop a concept of the 'bad'/paraliterary reader who in his/her reading relies heavily on

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immersive processes. Immersion will be defined according to the ideas outlined by Marie-Laure Ryan in *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* (2015).

I will then link this concept of the 'bad'/paraliterary reader to an analysis of the book subscription box *Once Upon a Book Club* and the reading practices which can be associated to this box. Each *Once Upon a Book Club* box does not only include the book but also several gifts, which relate to a quote on a certain page in the book. The function of these gifts will be at the center of attention in this paper, focusing on the following questions: How do the gifts facilitate different variations of immersion into the story world? How can the gifts be classified into item categories and how do items of different categories vary in the degree of their immersive potential? And finally: In what way does the immersive potential of the gifts relate to the concept of 'bad'/paraliterary reading—is *Once Upon a Book Club* truly a box for the 'bad reader'?

After an introduction to the market for (book) subscription boxes in the anglophone world, especially in the US, and a short survey of the state of research on book subscription boxes, I will approach these questions by examining in an exemplary way the contents of the 2019 Adult Boxes of *Once Upon a Book Club*. However, we will first explore the concepts this paper is based on.

In order to develop her concept of the paraliterary, Merve Emre starts with a quiz which Vladimir Nabokov used to present to first semester students in his literature classes. Its aim was to find out what the students thought would be a good reader:

1. "The reader should belong to a book club.
2. The reader should identify himself or herself with the hero or heroine.
3. The reader should concentrate on the socio-economic angle.
4. The reader should prefer a story with action and dialogue to one with none.
5. The reader should have seen the book in a movie.
6. The reader should be a budding author.
7. The reader should have imagination.
8. The reader should have memory.
9. The reader should have a dictionary.
10. The reader should have some artistic sense" [1].

For Nabokov "the good reader is one who has imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense" [1], in other words the good reader is the reader in literature departments at universities, the 'close' or 'critical' reader. Emre takes Nabokov's quiz as a starting point to define the other side, "the 'bad readers' who lurke[…] outside the literature classroom" [2]. For her 'bad readers' are the ones that incorporate the qualities Nabokov described in the other numbers—people who are "socialized into the practices of readerly identification, emotion, action, and interaction" [2] who are "trying to feel what fictional characters [feel]" [2]. However, she prefers to call them paraliterary readers, because in their ideas about reading they were educated outside the literature departments of universities, that is in the periphery of the institutions that traditionally define what literature is.

This means on the one hand that 'bad'/paraliterary readers are the ones who engage in the paraliterary reading practices described above, but on the other hand they are also readers who prefer works considered as paraliterature. Emre uses a very broad definition of paraliterature including not only "properly 'literary' novels but also 'how to' manuals, advertisements, magazines, newspapers, simple novels, and bureaucratic documents" [2]. For my paper I will use the term in the narrower sense as a synonym for popular or genre fiction, for genres at the margins of what literary scholars typically regard as literature, like mystery stories, science fiction, fantasy and so-called women's literature ("Paraliterature [3]").

In addition to Emre's idea of paraliterary reading, this paper ties in another concept, the Neurocognitive Poetics Model initially developed by Arthur M. Jacobs and Raoul Schrott in *Gehirn und Gedicht*. Its purpose is to present a multi-perspective model of the processes at work during reading, including ideas from various disciplines like rhetoric, aesthetics, poetics, experimental reading research as well as cognitive and affective neuroscience [4]. The NCPM organizes the reading process along two basic trajectories, which are rival to each other but not necessarily mutually exclusive: the immersive and the aesthetic trajectory [5]. When reading a text, its nature, the reader's disposition and the reading context cause the reader to follow either of the trajectories.

On the immersive trajectory, implicit processes are at work, whereas on the aesthetic trajectory explicit processes dominate. Therefore, Jacobs calls the textual elements facilitating immersive processes BG elements (background elements) and the textual elements facilitating aesthetic processes FG elements (foreground elements).

In a further step, the model also connects the immersive trajectory to the left hemispheric networks of the brain and a fluent reading mode [4] and the aesthetic trajectory to the right hemispheric networks and a dysfluent reading mode [4]. Explaining those connections in detail, however, would go beyond the scope and aim of this paper. Relevant in this context is how we can envision what happens along the two trajectories, principally the immersive trajectory.

Examples for FG elements in a text could be elements that cause defamiliarization like stylistic devices, rhetorical figures or tropes, unusual form elements or semantic ambiguities [4]. These features lead to explicit mental processes: The reader focuses on formal aspects of the text and an aesthetic appreciation of the text is foregrounded.

> "BG features such as familiar words and phrases facilitate immersive processes […] through the automatic (implicit) activation of familiar cognitive schemata, situation models, and affective responses (e.g., empathy, suspense, or vicarious fear, joy etc.)" [4].

BG elements are, therefore, linked to finding familiarity in the text, a familiarity that constitutes the basis for affective reader responses or so-called fiction feelings [4]. According to Jacobs, especially fiction feelings caused by action-rich scenes or emotional narratives facilitate immersion [4]. This relates directly to Ryan's three varieties of immersion, which Jacobs also refers to: plot (temporal immersion), character emotions (affective immersion) and setting (spatial immersion) [6].

Going back to Emre it also becomes apparent that her ideas of 'bad'/paraliterary reading are closely linked to immersion: The aspects that she singles out as indicators of 'bad reading', namely identification with the protagonists, the wish to feel their emotions or a focus on action are all features of immersion. In other words, paraliterary reading can be considered synonymous to a reader's preference for the immersive trajectory of the NCPM.

Accordingly, paraliterature can be defined as texts with dominant BG elements which create fiction feelings and ultimately lead to the experience of immersion. Or in Jacobs' words:

> "Thus, texts that offer familiar, easy-to-process spatial aspects, a clear or surprising chain of events providing a good deal of 'what happens next?' suspense […], and, perhaps most importantly, convincing depictions of the inner life of the protagonists […] can drag readers easily into the 'text world', making them forget the 'real' environment around them" [4].

The features Jacobs mentions as supportive of immersive processes are often given in genre fiction [6] which closes the circle between paraliterary reading, paraliterature or genre fiction and the immersive trajectory of the NCPM.

Book Subscription Boxes: Market and Research Overview

The Market for Subscription Boxes

In her article on book subscription boxes for children, Rachel Noorda defines subscription boxes in the following terms:

> "A subscription box is a collection of niche and often customized items that are shipped regularly (usually once a month) to customers on a subscription payment model, in which customers subscribe and pay for a certain period; month by month, 3-months, 6-months, and annual subscriptions are all common with subscription boxes" [7].

Since 2010 subscription boxes for physical goods have become increasingly popular in the anglophone world, especially in the US [8]. From 2013 to 2016, the numbers of site visitors to subscription box websites have gone up significantly to "more than 21.4 million visits in January 2016, up from 722,000 in 2013" [8].

According to a Hitwise study from 2018, the most popular categories for subscription boxes are food, beauty, apparel, lifestyle, pets and kids [9]. The Big Five of the subscription boxes are Stitch Fix (fashion), Blue Apron (food), Dollar Shave Club (bathroom products), Hello Fresh (food) and TechStyle Fashion Group (fashion) [10].

In the emergent market for subscription boxes, the ones dedicated to books only constitute a small share [10]. However, marketplaces for subscription boxes list significant numbers of book subscription boxes: Cratejoy now offers 173 and My Subscription Addiction offers 114 boxes related to books (March 2020, author's count).

In order to classify the existing offers on subscription boxes, Thomas Rudolph et al. identified three archetypes of subscription boxes organized along a continuum of surprise: "Predefined subscriptions [which] keep consumers supplied with everyday items such as razors, socks, and food […]" [11] offer the lowest level of surprise. Other subscriptions, however, do not give consumers any control about what they will receive, because the aim is that they discover something new [11]. These are called surprise subscriptions. Situated the middle of these two poles, with a medium level of surprise, are curated subscriptions which usually include products of a certain category which consumers have chosen before [11]. Book subscription boxes are mostly curated subscriptions or less frequently surprise subscriptions.

As to the profile of subscribers, McKinsey conducted a survey in 2018 interviewing 5000 US customers about their subscription behavior. According to this study, box subscribers are usually aged between 25 and 44, they have a relatively affluent background and 60 percent of them are female [12].

State of Research on Book Subscription Boxes

The most important article to this day about book subscription boxes from a book history perspective is Rachel Noorda's "The Element of Surprise: A Study of Children's Book Subscription Boxes in the USA", published in this journal recently. Even though she puts a special focus on boxes for children's books, her article also serves as an introduction to the US market for book subscription boxes in general and is therefore one of the fundamental texts on this topic.

There are publications on book sales clubs providing concepts which are also relevant regarding subscription boxes. Corinna Norrick-Rühl's recently published minigraph *Book Clubs and Book Commerce* [13], for example, analyzes four characteristics of book clubs that make a membership worthwhile for readers: convenience, community, concession and curation. When discussing the chances and challenges for book clubs in the twenty first century, Norrick-Rühl also applies this model to subscription boxes.

Furthermore, articles on direct book sales like Neal Goff's "Direct-Response Bookselling: How it Died, Why it is Alive Again, and Why it will Become Even More Important in the Future" [14] help to understand the current success of subscription boxes.

Overall, however, there is not much research yet that deals specifically with book subscription boxes [7]. It is therefore not surprising that articles about the box *Once Upon a Book Club* are also still wanting in the literature corpus. As Noorda describes in her survey of the state of research, most literature on subscription boxes comes from the areas of marketing and consumer behavior [7].

What has been published so far in books, journals, or the publishing press can be classified into two broad categories. The first category comprises literature about subscription boxes as a business model in general, including advice on how to build up a subscription business and analyses about why subscription boxes appeal to customers. Examples are the article by Thomas Rudolph et al. "Disruption at the Door: A Taxonomy on Subscription Models in Retailing", John Warrillow's book

The Automatic Customer: Creating a Subscription Business in Any Industry, each developing a taxonomy of subscription business models [15].

Furthermore, the article "My Little Box, Oh My Little Box: A Video-Netnographic Study On The Expression Of Values In Subscription-Based E-Commerce" by Mohamed Slim Ben Mimoun et al. [16] and Sarah Steimer's [17] article "Subscription Box as Stratagem" [11] would fall into this category. Additionally, the McKinsey study "Thinking inside the subscription box: New research on e-commerce consumers" by Tony Chen et al. [12] as well as the Hitwise studies "Subscription Boxes in 2018 US Market" [9] and "Discovery, Surprise, Inspiration: The Rise of Subscription Box Shopping" [8] can be included.

The second category consists of articles concerned specifically with book subscription boxes, mostly coming from the publishing press, which deal with the business opportunities that the boxes offer to the publishing industry. For example, Judith Rosen's article "Crate Escapes" [10] and Karen Raugust's article "New E-Commerce Opportunities for Kids' Books" [18] in Publishers Weekly or Molly Flatt's article "Book subscription boxes: industry hope or all hype?" in The Bookseller [19].

Once Upon a Book Club: Gifts as Paraliterary Objects

What Is Inside?—A Look into the Adult Boxes from 2019

Once Upon a Book Club is a monthly book subscription box offering an Adult and a Young Adult version. Each box costs $34.99 per month, plus shipping [20]. The Adult Box, which this paper focuses on, contains a newly released book (usually published within the last three months), a postcard featuring a quote from the book, questions for live discussions on Facebook and Instagram and—the box's USP—three to five gifts which relate to a certain quote from the book [21]. All gifts are wrapped and have a page number printed on the wrapping. Readers are not supposed to open the gifts until they reach the designated page.

Although the website does not specify a target group—apart from the separation of Adult and YA box—several aspects of the box's web presentation indicate that it has been designed for women. On the FAQ-page it is stressed that *Once Upon a Book Club* is a "women-run company, and the majority of [the] books include strong female characters" [20]. The color of the carton, in which the box is shipped, is pink and some of the boxes contain items mainly used by women, like earrings or lipsticks. Furthermore, the advertisement video on the landing page also features a woman, indicating that the curators of the box imagine a woman as their ideal customer.

Concerning the genres of the books, *Once Upon a Book Club* lists six genres which are supposed to be regularly included in the boxes: women's fiction, magical realism, contemporary fiction, historical fiction, mystery and thriller [20]. The Adult Boxes from 2019 predominantly featured historical fiction (five books), contemporary fiction and family (three books), suspense, thriller or mystery (two books) as well as fantasy and romance with each one book. This overview of the genres shows

that *Once Upon a Book Club* mainly ships books which can be subsumed under the term paraliterature as defined in chapter one.

Regarding the gifts, *Once Upon a Book Club* states on their webpage that the boxes can include either story-significant or useful items. Of course, these criteria have to be applied with caution since it can be very subjective what is considered useful or story-significant by the reader. *Once Upon a Book Club* describes story-significant items as follows:

> "Story-significant pieces mean that it's a piece that may not have any monetary value but add [sic] to the reader experience we try to convey to our readers. These items have included replica letters, recipes, identification cards, historical photographs and more!" [20]

The webpage does not offer a definition of useful items, but—inferred from the above definition—they could be defined as items with a certain monetary value which could as well be understood and used independently of the story. Examples for useful items listed on the webpage include: "purses, wallets, candles, kitchen items, household goods, picture frames, jewelry, bath and beauty products, accessories, toys [and] small snacks" [20].

In my classification[1] of the gifts in Table 1, on the one hand I keep up the curator's separation into useful and story-significant items, but on the other hand I also classify the gifts by item categories (accessories, clothes, kitchen etc.). Both classifications will be of use in the following chapter for examining the immersive potential of the gifts.

The 2019 Adult Boxes have included more useful items (34) than story-significant items (17). Accessories of various kinds were the items most frequently included (11), followed by kitchen-related objects (8). From the category of useful items beauty products (4), notebooks (3) and electronic devices (3) were also repeatedly part of the box.

Among the story-significant items were mostly notes in various forms (6), replica letters (5) and photographs or pictures.

Paraliterary Objects for Paraliterary Readers—The Function of the Gifts

> "… open a one of a kind, hand-picked gift that will make you feel like you're really living the story" [22]

The aim of this chapter is to find out how the gifts could make readers feel like they were living the story, or in other words: How can the gifts be conducive to immersive processes? For defining immersion, I will use Marie-Laure Ryan's notion of immersion which the NCPM also relies on. As I have mentioned above in the

[1] Note on the method: In order to classify the gifts, I went through the entries in the archive of 2019 Adult Boxes. Considering the definitions and examples for useful and story-significant items on the website as well as the quotes associated to each gift, I categorized the gifts as either useful or story-significant. In a second step I identified higher-order categories and counted how many items could be associated to these categories. Every item relates to only one category.

Table 1 Gift categories *Once Upon A Book Club* 2019 Adult Boxes (table and categorization by author)

Category	Amount
Useful	34
Accessories:	11
Jewelry	4
Pen	1
Sunglasses	1
Pillowcase	1
False rabbit's foot	1
Bag/case	3
Clothes:	2
Scarf	1
Kimono	1
Notebook	3
Kitchen:	8
Plate	2
Mug	3
Bottle	1
Spoon	1
Coaster	1
Beauty product:	4
Body lotion	1
Soap	1
Oil	1
Lipstick	1
Decoration	2
Electronics	3
Food	1
Story significant	17
Letter	5
Note:	6
Coupon	2
Flyer	1
List	1
Other note	2
Photo/picture	4
Mask	1
Newspaper article	1

context of the NCPM, Ryan mainly distinguishes three varieties of immersion: "spatial immersion, the response to setting; temporal immersion, the response to story; and emotional immersion, the response to characters" [6].

According to Ryan immersive responses to setting can be achieved by different means: by evoking names of familiar or well-known places, by activating

stereotypical ideas about places already stored in the reader's memory or by mentioning seemingly insignificant details of a setting [6]. The function of those details is "to fix an atmosphere and to jog the reader's memory. Some of the gifts take up details from the setting. They are the physical representation of these details in the story which do not seem to have another function than to conjure up a certain atmosphere. Not surprisingly, examples can be found mostly in the item category "decoration." In the April novel *The Deepest Blue* by Sarah Beth Durst the character Kelo hangs up lots of charms in his studio. Matching this scene, the box provides "a seashell windchime charm similar to the kinds of charms Kelo would have hung in the studio" [23]. Unwrapping this item, the reader could get a clearer impression of the setting and it could be easier for him to immerse in the story world. The same goes for a macramé wall hanging in the May box or the art print of a painting which one of the characters is working on in her art studio [23].

Temporal immersion as response to story is closely tied to suspense—the reader becomes entangled in the interplay of past and anticipated future events in the story as he/she wonders about the variety of possible scenarios while reading [6]: "The passing of time matters to the reader because it is […] a process of disclosure" [6]. This kind of immersion is not so much relevant with regard to the gifts—at least not in Ryan's sense. Since they were not conceptualized together with the story, items like notes or letters do not provide any additional information about the plot and therefore do not contribute to the creation of suspense. However, anticipating the next gift is also a kind of temporal immersion. While reading, one does not only wonder about possible future scenarios in the story, but also about what the next gift will be. In this case the passing of time also matters as a process of disclosure, but instead of relating to the plot the disclosure relates to the gifts themselves.

For emotional immersion Ryan specifies three relevant types of emotions: "[s]ubjective reactions to characters and judgement of their behavior" [6], empathy—defined as "emotions felt […] for others" [6] or a "spontaneous, vicarious sharing of affect" [24]—and "[e]motions felt for oneself" [6]. The latter refers to emotions a reader does not feel because he/she is mirroring the emotions of a character, but because the story itself evokes feelings in the reader, for example a feeling of disgust when reading about spiders attacking a character.

Emotional immersion is the most important kind of immersion with regard to the gifts, because very often they are closely connected to the feelings of a character or relate to strong emotional moments in the story. Therefore, the physical presence of the gifts can either cause emotional immersion because it makes the reader feel empathy for the character or because the reader faces the same objects as does the character in an emotional scene. However, the overview of gifts in the archive of 2019 Adult Boxes gives the impression that not all gifts carry the same rate of immersive potential.

Once Upon a Book Club's division in story-significant and useful items already insinuates that story-significant objects could contribute more to the immersive process because they are more closely linked to the story. Indeed, to story-significant items like letters, notes, photos and pictures high immersive potential can be attributed since—being by nature very personal items—they bring the reader emotionally closer to the characters, enabling the "sharing of affect" [24] Ryan

sees as characteristic for immersion. An example would be the letter in the October box (*Today We Go Home* by Kelli Estes) which the protagonist Emily receives from her aunt, and which makes her cry [23]. The hug coupon in the September box (*A Thousand Roads Home* by Carmel Harrington) is another instance of high immersive potential because it is a powerful expression of the relationship between the character Ruth and her son DJ [7]. A third example could be the written note in the July box (*The Long Flight Home* by Alan Hlad) which the female protagonist is obviously eager to read [23].

In addition to the story-significant items, some of the useful items also have a certain immersive potential if they relate to a very emotional passage of the book or if a character connects strong emotions with the item. These could be items of the category "notebook" like the vintage journal in January which relates to a journal in the story that will probably disclose information about the protagonist's past, or the diary in the October box [23].

Interestingly the item category "mug" in one case also seems to carry immersive potential since protagonists tend to drink tea in emotionally decisive moments: In the July box the mug relates to a scene in which the character Susan wonders whether she was wrong about another protagonist's feelings for her.

Finally, there are also items which hardly seem to have any immersive potential. This includes items that were merely mentioned in the story, but do not relate to a protagonist's feelings or evoke an emotional atmosphere—for example, electronic devices like the charging lead in the August box—or items that are just supposed to be funny like the cigarette pen in February, the coaster set in the shape of a cactus in December or the flash drive that looks like a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* in June [23].

To sum up, for the immersive potential it does not necessarily matter whether the items were categorized as story-significant or useful. Certainly, the story-significant items carry the highest immersive potential. However, this does not mean that useful items by contrast do not carry any immersive potential at all. It rather depends on the relationship between the item and the quote to which it refers. Useful items that relate to a very emotional passage of the book or items with which a character connects strong emotions can also lead to immersion. Whereas items that were only casually mentioned in the story or items which are just supposed to be funny, have a very low immersive potential.

Consequently, even though the category of story-significant items in Table 1 includes only half as many items as the category of useful items, this does not lead to the conclusion that actually only a third of the items in the box facilitate immersive processes. As we have seen, there are quite a few items which can be used independently from the story but still contribute to the immersion of the reader because of the role they play in the story.

Therefore, the gifts can be considered paraliterary objects, that is objects supporting paraliterary reading practices: Their function is to make the reader feel like he/she is living the story, meaning that their function is to facilitate the immersive processes which are central to paraliterary reading.

Conclusion(s): A Box for the 'Bad Reader'

"Bringing Books to Life, Monthly"—according to this marketing slogan, *Once Upon a Book Club* is inherently a box for the 'bad reader', that is, Emre's paraliterary reader—and this in fact in two respects. On the one hand, the boxes include genres that are generally considered as paraliterature, such as historical fiction, mystery or thriller and women's fiction. This means that the genres of the books can already indicate that the box itself is a paraliterary phenomenon.

However, the paraliterary is not just a matter of genre, but also a matter of reading mode since, on the other hand, the promise to bring stories to life every month is a promise of immersion. Expressed with the vocabulary of the NCPM: It appeals to readers who favor the immersive trajectory over the aesthetic trajectory. This paper has established the paraliterary reader as one who aims for immersion in the story world and is therefore attracted to paraliterary texts, that is texts with dominant BG elements, which create fiction feelings and ultimately lead to the experience of immersion.

Once Upon a Book Club tries to provide additional immersive potential by including gifts in their monthly boxes which are supposed to intensify the experience of fiction feelings and therefore foster the process of immersion. This paper has shown how the gifts can encourage different varieties of immersion (spatial, temporal and emotional) and that they can have different degrees of immersive potential.

The division into story-significant and useful items—taken from the self-description of the subscription box—turned out to be helpful for the analysis, but also possibly misleading. It could indicate an equation of story-significant items with items carrying immersive potential. However, some of the useful items can also have relatively high immersive potential. For evaluating the immersive potential of a gift, it is therefore important to take the relation between gift and text into account.

Further research in this field could explore this connection in more detail by examining the gifts not only in their relation to the quotes but to the story as a whole. Additionally, finding alternatives for the classification of the gifts might as well be an option for further investigations. It could also be worthwhile to survey customers of *Once Upon a Book Club* in order to find out how they actually experience immersion when reading and opening the gifts. This approach could enrich the findings of this paper by making its hypotheses subject to a reality check.

To sum up, even though not all gifts share the strong immersive potential of a letter or a diary, the thesis can be held up that the gifts are generally conducive to immersive processes and supportive of paraliterary reading practices. Consequently, *Once Upon A Book Club* can be termed a paraliterary box for the paraliterary reader, or a box for the 'bad reader', because it encompasses books from paraliterary genres and because of the immersive effect of the gifts.

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