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We pursue a new approach to anatomising how readers engage, interact and empathise with fictional narratives by exploring and modelling the cognitive processes underlying the experience of a story. Existing research (e.g. Bransford, et al. 1972; Johnson-Laird 1983; Zwaan & Radvansky 1998) has focussed on text and discourse processing, investigating what influences readers' memories of texts, and under what circumstances memory distortions are likely to occur. We combine this with more recent work within cognitive poetics (e.g. Stockwell 2012; Whiteley 2014) to model reader responses to different textual inputs. Part of our focus will be on texture and emotional engagement. For example, how and why do readers engage (perhaps, empathise?) with certain stories but not others?

Our pilot study focusses on the differences between plot/event-driven and character-focused stories. We ask how these types of stories differ in terms of how readers encode and recall (i) event structure/sequence, (ii) temporal or spatial information, and (iii) character-based inferences. Our methodology draws on the psycholinguistic studies mentioned above, augmenting them with cutting edge quantitative modelling techniques (hierarchical regression models; Gelman & Hill 2007) that will allow us to probe the relationships among story characteristics, aspects of an individual reader's background experience, and aspects of the context of reading.

Keywords: cognition, reader response, texture, empirical, emotional engagement