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# Responding to the Constructions of Age in Children's Literature: An Intergenerational Approach

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# Summary

In recent decades, there has been an uptick in intergenerational animosity, creating a need to deepen our understanding of how society constructs age, and how individuals position themselves vis-à-vis such constructs. Children's literature is particularly suitable for this kind of research due to it not only being a product predominantly written, marketed, and published *by* adults *for* children, but also because it tends to contain characters of a range of ages who interact with one another. Using insights from children's literature criticism, reader-response studies and age studies, this thesis explores **how the age of the real reader affects the understanding of age in literature for young readers.** It does this via an empirical, reader-response research project centred on three books: *Iep!* (1996)*,* written by Joke van Leeuwen, *Voor altijd samen, amen* (1999), written by Guus Kuijer, and *My Name Is Mina* (2011)*,* written by David Almond. Using these books, I conducted semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 51 readers between the ages of 9 and 79. During these individual and group discussions, I talked with readers about their own age, the representation of age in the book they read, and other related topics. These talks were recorded and transcribed. For the analysis, I used NVivo.

I developed the core research question of this thesis into four more specific and largely self-contained discussions, with the following key findings:

**Research question 1: Which age norms are validated/challenged by the participants in their responses to age in children's literature and is there a relation to the age of the reader?**

Age norms are "age-related social norms" which, like other social norms "prescribe or interdict particular actions and […] are acknowledged by the members of a social group" (Radl 758). Readers used a wide range of age norms throughout the interviews to make sense of their own age and the age of characters. In my analysis, I opted to focus on innocence, wisdom, fantasy and imagination. These were not only prevalent in readers' comments, they are also extensively discussed within fields like children's literature criticism and childhood studies (a.o. Kincaid 73; Nikolajeva, "Neuroscience" 27; Pickard 180; Natov 3; Reeves 41; Gubar, "Innocence" [1st edition] 122).

The results here were nuanced and complex. Some child readers confessed that they were aware that adults perceived them as innocent and admitted to playing into this to escape punishment for bad behaviour. Other child readers agreed with the idea that children know less than adults and need their guidance, thus validating childhood innocence. Meanwhile, adult readers not only tended to see childhood innocence as normal and desirable, some also professed a need to enforce childhood innocence by controlling what

children read, arguing – for example – that *Voor altijd samen, amen* was unsuitable for a young audience because of its subject matter. Meanwhile, wisdom was only explicitly discussed by adult readers. Most adult readers felt that wisdom increased with age, although some readers acknowledged the potential for children to be wise, with the important caveat that they felt that children who displayed wisdom become partially adult.

As for imagination and fantasy, child readers associated these qualities almost exclusively with childhood, as part of a complex view on the aging process that entails – in part – pretending to believe in imagined things for the sake of play and enjoyment. However, child readers also firmly believed that imagination is something to be left behind as part of growing up, with some affirming that children's literature should support this change. Older child characters who displayed unbridled imagination were criticized. Adult readers, in contrast, constructed childhood imagination as completely genuine belief in unreal things, and defended children's right to continued possession thereof, reacting negatively when they felt that a child character's imagination was criticized by adult characters. At the same time, adult readers' perspective on adult imagination was complex, with some describing themselves as being among the few adults who managed to maintain imagination into adulthood, some lamenting their loss of childhood imagination, and some claiming that possessing imagination as an (older) adult is a sign of mental or physical health issues.

### Research question 2: When reading a children's book, what memories are prompted in readers of different ages, and do these memories shape empathic responses to characters?

Scholars often connect memory, empathy and literature, arguing for instance that empathy is partially built on memory (Stening and Stening 288; Keen 5; Caracciolo 130), and that narrative stimulates empathy (Mar and Oatley 181; see also Stephens vi; Whitehead 55). To empirically explore these claims, I asked one group of participants who read *My Name Is Mina* to keep track of the memories that reading the book prompted for them. During the interview, I then discussed these memories with them, paying particular attention to the empathic responses that were (not) related to these memories.

A number of interesting results emerged from these interviews. For instance, child readers adopted a broader interpretation of "memory", which included a level of imagination that was absent from adult readers' memories. Through these imaginative memories, prompted by the book, they were the only readers who empathized with non-human characters. Emotions also were an important factor, with readers empathizing more with the book's main character if they recalled memories that had a strong emotional component. This latter point was also entangled with how much they saw themselves as being "like" the main character (as a child).

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Research question 3: How do readers of different ages engage with the extraordinary activities that are included in David Almond's *My Name Is Mina*?

*My Name Is Mina* contains several "extraordinary activities" for the reader to complete, such as "Take a line for a walk. Find out what you're drawing when you've drawn it." One group of readers was asked to complete these extraordinary activities while they were reading. The main objective here was to explore if and how readers of different ages engage differently with creative assignments prompted by a book.

My key finding here was that readers' ages not only shaped the finished "extraordinary activities," but fundamentally played a part in how they (felt they) could respond. For instance, several adult readers commented on how they felt more shame as adults compared to when they were children, which made it more difficult to engage with some of the activities. Readers' engagement with the activities also revealed kinship across age groups. For instance, both child and adult participants commented on how their engagement with the activities was shaped by the environments in which they read the book. Finally, older readers' replies to the extraordinary activities thematized age, for instance by writing short stories about themselves in which they reflect on age(ing). Through these analyses, I explored how readers' ages implicitly and explicitly shaped their engagement with the extraordinary activities.

Research question 4: How do power, age and matter become enmeshed in readers' participation in a reader-response project on children's literature?

The intent of this analysis was to zoom out and account for the broader power dynamics that shaped readers' participation in my research project. Therefore, I conducted this analysis within a new materialist framework. New materialism urges us to "decenter ourselves" and "pay more attention to the wider worldly relationships that we're all enmeshed in and with" (Arndt et al. 6).

My data revealed a complex web of entanglements between readers, their broader environment, characters, age and more. These entanglements extended beyond the actual interviews. Readers' participation often involved implicit and explicit intergenerational power dynamics, ranging from matters such as parental consent for child participants, to older readers who needed assistance from younger relatives to set up the computer to join an online interview. In the interviews themselves, readers of different ages expressed complicated views on characters' power and how that relates to those characters' ages.

Across these four discussions, this thesis explores the complex interaction between readers, age, and the experience of literature. Each section explores these interactions from a different angle, but I also discuss some broader takeaways that emerged across the entire thesis, such as child readers' tendency to adhere to age norms with more rigidity than adults, or the potential for intergenerational focus group discussions about age in children's literature to engender some forms of intergenerational understanding.

# Dutch Summary

Intergenerationeel conflict neemt de laatste decennia toe, waardoor er een steeds grotere nood is om meer inzicht te verkrijgen in hoe onze maatschappij betekenis geeft aan leeftijd, en hoe individuen zich binnen dit discours positioneren. Kinderliteratuur is bijzonder geschikt voor dit soort onderzoek omdat het niet alleen geschreven, uitgegeven en verkocht wordt *door* volwassenen *voor* kinderen; kinderliteratuur bevat ook vaak personages van verschillende leeftijden die met elkaar in contact komen. Deze scriptie combineert inzichten uit kinderliteratuurstudie, reader-response onderzoek en leeftijdsstudie om te onderzoeken **hoe de leeftijd van de lezer het begrip van leeftijd in literatuur voor jonge lezers beïnvloedt.** Om deze vraag te beantwoorden heb ik empirisch onderzoek uitgevoerd met 51 lezers tussen 9 en 79 jaar oud. Lezers werd gevraagd om een kinderboek te lezen, en om nadien deel te nemen aan een semigestructureerd interview, en eventueel een focusgroep gesprek. Tijdens deze interviews en groepsgesprekken stelde ik vragen over de leeftijd van de lezer, wat ze vonden van de representatie van leeftijd in het kinderboek dat ze gelezen hebben, en andere gerelateerde onderwerpen. Deze gesprekken werden opgenomen en getranscribeerd. Mijn analyse voerde ik uit met de hulp van NVivo. Lezers werd gevraagd om één van deze drie boeken te lezen: *Iep!* (1996)*,* geschreven door Joke van Leeuwen, *Voor altijd samen, amen* (1999), geschreven door Guus Kuijer, en *My Name Is Mina* (2011)*,* geschreven door David Almond.

In mijn scriptie heb ik de hoofdonderzoeksvraag vertaald naar vier specifiekere en grotendeels onafhankelijke discussies, waarvan ik de voornaamste resultaten kort zal toelichten.

**Onderzoeksvraag 1: Welke leeftijdsnormen worden gevalideerd/in twijfel getrokken door de deelnemers in hun reacties op leeftijd in kinderliteratuur en is er een verband met de leeftijd van de lezer?**

Leeftijdsnormen zijn "age-related social norms" die, net zoals andere sociale normen "prescribe or interdict particular actions and […] are acknowledged by the members of a social group" (Radl 758). Lezers gebruikten een groot aantal verschillende leeftijdsnormen doorheen de interviews om hun eigen leeftijd betekenis te geven en om te reflecteren over de leeftijd van personages. In mijn analyse opteerde ik om te focussen op reflecties over onschuld, wijsheid, fantasie en verbeelding. Deze leeftijdsnormen kwamen niet alleen vaak voor in de opmerkingen van lezers, ze worden ook uitgebreid besproken binnen velden zoals kinderliteratuurkritiek en kindertijdstudies (bv. Kincaid 73; Nikolajeva, "Neuroscience" 27; Pickard 180; Natov 3; Reeves 41; Gubar, "Innocence" [1st edition] 122).

De resultaten waren genuanceerd en complex. Sommige jonge lezers bekenden dat ze wisten dat volwassenen hun als onschuldig beschouwden, en gaven toe dat ze zich soms extra onschuldig voordeden om minder gestraft te worden als ze stout waren. Andere jongere lezers gingen akkoord met het idee dat kinderen minder weten dan volwassenen en hun begeleiding nodig hebben, en stemden zo in met het idee dat kinderen onschuldig zijn. Volwassen lezers bevestigden kinderlijke onschuld niet alleen als normaal en ideaal, sommige beaamden ook dat het nodig is om kinderlijke onschuld te beschermen door o.a. te controleren wat kinderen lezen. Zo werd *Voor altijd samen, amen* door sommige volwassen lezers gezien als ongeschikt voor jonge lezers door de onderwerpen die in dat boek worden aangekaart. Wijsheid werd enkel besproken door volwassen lezers. De meeste volwassen lezers gaven aan dat wijsheid toeneemt met leeftijd, alhoewel sommige ook de reflectie toevoegden dat kinderen wijs kunnen zijn, al gaf dit het kind ook een volwassen uitstraling. Een kind kan voor volwassen lezers niet tegelijk kinds en wijs zijn.

Jonge lezers associeerden fantasie en verbeelding exclusief met de kindertijd, als deel van een complexe blik op leeftijd en opgroeien waarbij je op een bepaalde leeftijd niet meer oprecht in fantasie gelooft, maar dat je doet alsof zodat je nog wel kan spelen en plezier hebben. Jongere lezers benadrukten ook dat fantasie iets is wat je achterlaat als je opgroeit, en dat kinderboeken daarom beter zijn als er minder fantasie in voorkomt. Personages die – volgens jonge lezers – te oud waren om oprecht te geloven in fantasie werden bekritiseerd. Voor volwassen lezers was kinderlijke fantasie een bron van oprecht geloof in dingen die niet bestaan. In plaats van alsof te doen geloven kinderen dus oprecht in spoken, monsters, etc. Volwassen lezers verdedigden ook het recht van kinderen om fantasie en verbeelding te hebben, en veroordeelden volwassen personages die de fantasie van jonge personages bekritiseerden. Tegelijkertijd hadden volwassen lezers een complexe blik op volwassen verbeelding. Sommige volwassen lezers beschreven zichzelf als één van de weinige volwassenen te zijn die nog fantasie hadden, andere reflecteerden over hoe jammer ze het wel niet vonden dat ze al hun verbeelding kwijt zijn gespeeld, en een laatste groep beschreef volwassen verbeelding als een symptoom van mentale of lichamelijke gezondheidsproblemen.

### Onderzoeksvraag 2: Welke herinneringen wekt het lezen van een kinderboek op bij lezers van verschillende leeftijden, en hebben deze herinneringen een impact op de empathie die lezers voelen voor een personage?

Academici verbinden geheugen, empathie en literatuur vaak met elkaar. Zo zijn er bijvoorbeeld argumenten dat empathie voor een deel geworteld is in geheugen (Stening and Stening 288; Keen 5; Caracciolo 130), en dat literatuur empathie stimuleert (Mar and Oatley 181; see also Stephens vi; Whitehead 55). Om dit empirisch te testen, werd één groep met deelnemers gevraagd om tijdens het lezen van *My Name Is Mina* bij te houden welke herinneringen het boek opwekte. Tijdens het interview besprak ik dan deze

herinneringen met hen, met nadruk op hoe deze hun empathische reactie (niet) beïnvloedde.

Hier kwamen een aantal interessante reacties uit voort. Jongere lezers hadden bijvoorbeeld een brede interpretatie van wat een "herinnering" kan zijn. Hun herinneringen waren bijvoorbeeld getint door hun verbeelding. Via deze fantasierijke herinneringen, voortgebracht door het boek, waren zij de enige lezers die empathie toonden voor niet-menselijke personages. Emoties bleken ook belangrijk te zijn. Lezers toonden meer empathie wanneer het boek herinneringen opwekte die lezers verbonden met een personage, en waar sterke emoties aan gekoppeld waren. Deze dynamiek werd nog verder versterkt wanneer lezers zich konden identificeren met het personage.

### Onderzoeksvraag 3: Hoe gaan lezers van verschillende leeftijden om met de bijzondere bezigheden uit *My Name Is Mina*?

*My Name Is Mina* bevat een aantal "bijzondere bezigheden" voor de lezer om uit te voeren, zoals "schrijf een verhaal over jezelf alsof je over iemand ander schrijft" (50). Ik heb aan een groep lezers van verschillende leeftijden gevraagd om deze bijzondere bezigheden uit te voeren tijdens het lezen. Het doel was om te onderzoeken of de leeftijd van de lezer beïnvloedt hoe lezers met deze creatieve opdrachten omgaan, en zo ja, wat deze verschillen zouden zijn?

Mijn belangrijkste bevinding was dat de leeftijd van lezers niet alleen hun omgang met de bijzondere bezigheden beïnvloedde, maar dat dit zelfs fundamenteel een rol speelde in de manier waarop ze (vonden dat ze) met deze opdrachten konden omgaan. Meerdere volwassen lezers merkten op dat ze zich meer schaamden als volwassene dan als kind, en dat deze schaamte het moeilijker maakte om met sommige van de bezigheden aan de slag te gaan. De omgang van lezers met deze opdrachten onthulde echter ook vormen van intergenerationeel verwantschap. Zowel kind lezers als jongvolwassenen merkten op dat ze gelimiteerd waren in de manier waarop ze konden omgaan met de opdrachten door de omgeving waarin ze het boek lazen. Deze omgevingen waren vaak gekoppeld aan maatschappelijke verwachtingen over leeftijd (bv. school en werk). Ten slotte gebruikte oudere lezers hun reacties op de bijzondere bezigheden om leeftijd zichtbaar te maken, voornamelijk door kortverhalen te schrijven over zichzelf waarin ze zelf reflecteren over leeftijd, of door verhalen te schrijven over oudere hoofdpersonages. Het voornaamste resultaat hier is dat de leeftijd van lezers impliciet en expliciet verweven was in hun manier van omgaan met de bijzondere bezigheden.

### Onderzoeksvraag 4: Hoe zijn macht, leeftijd en materie met elkaar verweven in de deelname van lezers aan een reader-response project over kinderliteratuur?

Het doel van deze analyse was om uit te zoomen en met een bredere blik naar mijn onderzoeksdata te kijken, met een bijzondere nadruk op de machtsrelaties die van invloed waren op de deelname van lezers aan mijn onderzoeksproject. Daarom voerde ik deze

analyse uit binnen een nieuw materialistisch kader. Nieuw materialisme benadrukt het belang van weg te kijken van de mens zelf, en meer nadruk te leggen op de bredere wereldlijke relaties waarbinnen we ons bevinden (Arndt et al. 6).

De data schetst een complex web van verstrengeling tussen lezers, hun bredere omgeving, personages, leeftijd en meer. Voor de interviews zelfs plaats konden vinden, was de deelname van lezers vaak afhankelijk van allerlei intergenerationele machtsdynamieken. Jongere lezers, bijvoorbeeld, waren afhankelijk van hun ouders om toestemming te geven voor deelname, terwijl oudere lezers vaak ondersteuning nodig hadden van jongere familieleden om deel te kunnen nemen aan een online interview. Tijdens de interviews zelf werd de macht van personages vaak aangekaart in de context van hun leeftijd, zowel door jonge als oudere lezers.

Over deze vier discussies heen verkent deze thesis de complexe interactie tussen lezers, hun leeftijd en de gerelateerde ervaring van literatuur. Elke sectie verkent deze interacties vanuit een andere hoek. Daarnaast zijn er ook een aantal bredere resultaten die relevant zijn voor de hele thesis. Jongere lezers waren bijvoorbeeld – doorheen verschillende discussies – regelmatig grotere voorstanders van strikte opvolging van leeftijdsnormen. Verder toonde de groepsgesprekken ook aan dat er potentieel is voor gesprekken met deelnemers van verschillende leeftijden om intergenerationeel begrip te bevorderen.

# Introduction

In 2013, *Time* magazine published the cover *The Me Me Me Generation: Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents*. The article's more conciliatory subtitle: *Why they'll save us all* (Stein) aimed to lighten the title's hostility, but failed to impress, and the cover prompted many other publications to voice their support of Millennials (a.o. Hawking; Klein; Reeve). Six years later, the "OK boomer" meme – a catchphrase used by young people to dismiss the viewpoints of older generations (specifically baby boomers) – rapidly caught on. In response to its popularity, *The New York Times* published an article entitled "'OK Boomer' Marks the End of Friendly Generational Relations," which featured several younger people voicing their frustrations. One 18-year-old explained how his generation is left frustrated at "the boomers" because their choices have negatively impacted Gen Z's present and future (Lorenz; see also Vayo 116).

Some of the reporting on this intergenerational hostility sketches a genuinely dire situation. In a 2018 opinion piece on intergenerational relations, Maximillian Alvarez writes:

> There's a war going on right now. […] The battle lines were drawn before you had any say in the matter, and the fate of everything hangs in the balance. As the old world crumbles around us, as we struggle for control over the scraps that are left, the young stand defiantly against the old, Millennials against the Baby Boomers, and vice versa. Other generations have no choice—they're going to have to pick a side. (Alvarez 118)

The threat of intergenerational conflict has not escaped policymakers. The United Nations in particular has repeatedly acknowledged the importance of intergenerational solidarity in a variety of declarations, documents, reports and conference proceedings since the early 2000s. For example, following the 2002 "World Assembly on Ageing," article 16 of the assembly's political declaration states:

> We recognize the need to strengthen solidarity among generations and intergenerational partnerships, keeping in mind the particular needs of both older and younger ones, and to encourage mutually responsive relationships between generations. (United Nations, *Madrid* 12)

This broader aim was then translated into a number of more specific proposed actions such as the development of age-integrated communities (United Nations, *Madrid* 46). Five years later, at the UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing, an International Plan of Action

was developed, with one of its core commitments being "to promote intergenerational and intragenerational solidarity" (Stuckelberger and Vikat 27). A decade after that, the 2017 Ministerial Conference on Ageing once again reaffirmed that:

> There is a tendency to pit generations against each other, and this is particularly the case when it comes to younger and older people. The mentality of "us versus them" is pervasive. Meanwhile, age-based discrimination affects both older and younger people alike, manifesting in different forms the same phenomenon that excludes certain groups from society. (United Nations, *Sustainable* 24)

As the UN's commitment to combatting intergenerational conflict shows, it is a problem that the highest levels of political power are aware of and wish to find solutions for. Following the UN's example, the European Research Council (ERC) has funded various research projects aimed at increasing our understanding of how society gives meaning to age, and how intergenerational solidarity might be engendered.

This thesis participates in that broader effort. It was written as part of the Constructing Age For Young Readers (CAFYR) project, situated at the University of Antwerp, funded by the ERC's Horizon 2020 funding scheme, and under the leadership of Vanessa Joosen. The CAFYR project is broadly predicated on the observation that children's literature, arguably even more so than literature for adults, offers a fascinating object of study for research on age. Consequently, it supported several researchers' work in deepening our understanding of the entanglement of – among other factors: age, readers, children's literature and authors. For my fellow PhD-student, Lindsey Geybels, the project opened up an exciting series of inquiries into how age is constructed by – and in – texts intended for readers young and old, mainly by focusing on expected reading comprehension of the target audience and differences in the descriptions of fictional characters of all ages (e.g. Geybels, "Grenzen" 113). In my case, it has meant exploring not only how actual readers give meaning to their own age and the age of characters in children's literature, but also how those views are negotiated in intergenerational conversations.

Briefly summarized, the impetus of my research is grounded in the following argument: age does not only derive its meaning from biology, but instead is also negotiated through competing cultural discourses. This is how concepts such as childhood, adulthood and old age are granted meaning (see a.o. Gallagher 28; Heywood epub; Hendrick 57; Sparrman 228; Van Lierop – Debrauwer 79; Mortimer and Moen 113). While the meanings behind these terms are historically variable, the 1950s-70s saw certain interpretations become particularly dominant. These then formed the backbone of western normative perspectives on age for decades (Blatterer, "Redefinition" 3.5). However, more recently, through various social, cultural and economic changes, constructions of age have again

become more individualized and varied, with previously dominant constructs of adulthood, childhood and old age losing their hegemonic status (Furstenberg 2; Silva 506; Boyden 189; Hubble and Tew 2; M.L. Johnson 563; Gilleard 159; Arnett 469). Meanwhile, scholars warn about the aforementioned rise in intergenerational animosity (Francioli and North), which can also be noted through the reporting on Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and the fearmongering about the cost of the aging population (Lorenz; Alvarez 118; Hubble and Tew 2; Segal 32; Santaulària i Capdevila 59; Gullette 1; Joosen, "Introduction" 3; Joosen, *Oud* 6-7; Kelly). In children's literature, several kinds of discourse on age intersect, both in the books themselves, but also in the way they are produced and distributed. Content-wise, children's literature often thematizes age and growing-up (Joosen, *Adulthood* 62-63; Nikolajeva, *Power* 50; Nodelman 65), and tends to contain characters of a variety of ages, especially when compared to adult literature (Hollindale 21). In terms of how it comes into being, it is the "only major category of literature that is generally written by one group (adults) for another group (children)" (Bernstein, "Going-to-Bed" 879; see also Pope and Round 258). In terms of reception, it is often discussed as a significant source of ideology that young readers internalize (Robichaud et al. 8), and children's books have been controversial in the past for portraying age in ways that some deem harmful (Niccolini 23; Henneberg, "Nexus" 126).

Despite children's literature's interesting relationship with age discourse, almost no empirical research has been conducted that explores the interaction between readers' ages and their experience of age in children's literature. Especially in this time of intergenerational conflict, it becomes all the more important to fill this gap in the research. Doing so offers fertile ground to explore a variety of topics, ranging from the potential for fiction to improve or impede intergenerational understanding, to the particular aspects of age characterization that readers of different ages find particularly problematic, or the different perspectives readers of different ages may adopt in response to the same fictional narrative, just to name a few. A key consideration here is that children's literature also is of significant importance for adults, for various reasons. For instance, children's literature is often experienced intergenerationally, with adults reading to children. Some children's books therefore also contain messages aimed at adult co-readers (Waller 136-138). It is also almost always adults who are the ones writing, publishing and buying children's literature. Thus, adults determine what is appropriate for young readers, and this includes portrayals of age. Aside from those factors, reading children's literature may also present adult readers with an opportunity for personal reflections on how they envisioned adulthood as children, or how they interact with children (Joosen, *Adulthood* 5).

In drawing all these parts together, this thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of how cultural narratives are shaped and underpin our understanding of self and others, by

exploring *how the age of the reader affects the understanding of age in fiction for young readers.* To answer this research question, I conducted qualitative empirical research in the form of 67 semi-structured interviews and 4 focus group conversations with 51 readers between the ages of 9 and 79. Prior to the interview, readers read one of three books: *Iep!* (1996), by Joke van Leeuwen, *Voor altijd samen, amen* (1999), by Guus Kuijer, or *My Name Is Mina* (2010), by David Almond. During the interviews and group discussions, I talked extensively with readers about their own age, the age of characters, intergenerational conflict, social constructs of age and more. In that regard, this dissertation has children's literature as its object of study, but it also uses it as a springboard to make broader reflections on cultural meaning-making. While I place my research in the abovementioned context of fear for widespread intergenerational animosity, it is not my intent to suggest that this issue can be solved solely by studying readers' responses to children's literature, or that this is the only extant discourse on intergenerational dynamics. Instead, I aim to demonstrate that studying the reflections of readers of *all* ages on children's literature offers a useful barometer of personal and shared reflections on age, which hopefully will prove beneficial for understanding – and perhaps engendering – intergenerational affinity. Accordingly, I explore a number of related research questions in this thesis, which I will outline in the next section.

As a final note before moving on to discussing my research questions, I hope that some groups may find my results especially valuable. Children's literature scholars who are interested in empirical work could use my data as inspiration for their own projects, while age scholars may refer to my work for the connections I establish between readers' constructs of their own age and the perception of age in children's literature. Outside of these mainly academic discussions, my research may also be of value to educators and policy makers in developing or advocating for approaches that entangle age and children's literature in a broader endeavor to stimulate intergenerational dialogue.

# Research questions

My research is intended to answer one of the CAFYR project's core research questions: **How does the age of the real reader affect the understanding of age in fiction for young readers?** I translated this abstract and broad research question into a number of more specific research questions. To do this, I applied two distinct approaches. First, I developed a list of more specific research questions at the beginning of my work on this project. These then formed the starting point from which I developed my initial interview-guides. In the end, I opted to adopt only one of these research questions as a core focus of this thesis. Nevertheless, I have included a list with all these research questions in appendix 1. This approach was supplemented with research questions I developed and explored in

several articles that I wrote during my research project (Duthoy, "Wiser"; Duthoy, "Dynamics"; Duthoy, "Exploration"). In this thesis, I synthesize these two approaches into a cohesive discussion about age, children's literature and readers.

My analyses reflect on four sub-questions that each highlight one aspect relevant to the core research question. These four research questions are:

1. Which age norms are validated/challenged by the participants in their responses to age in children's literature and is there a relation to the age of the reader?
2. When reading a children's book, what memories are prompted in readers of different ages, and do these memories shape empathic responses to characters?
3. How do readers of different ages engage with the extraordinary activities that are included in David Almond's *My Name Is Mina*?
4. How do power, age and matter become enmeshed in readers' participation in a reader-response project on children's literature?

Research question 1 is answered by reflecting on four sets of interviews that cover two books*,* while the other research questions each focus on interviews about one book in particular. This disparity is due to the origin and conceptualization of these research questions. Research question 1 was designed at the onset of my research project as a more general, high-level question that was to be discussed by reflecting on several interview-cycles. Research questions 2 and 3 were developed later in the research process, as starting points for the development of more focused interview cycles that generated the specific data needed to answer them. Research question 4 was designed in response to a call for papers in 2020, at which point only the *Iep!* data was available. Before moving on to outlining the general structure of this dissertation, I will first offer some preliminary context for these research questions.

## Research question 1: Which age norms are validated/challenged by the participants in their responses to age in children's literature and is there a relation to the age of the reader?

Age norms, the core topic of research question 1, are social norms that govern the "network of expectations" that an individual or group may have about age (Neugarten 711; see also Radl 758). Age norms dictate, for instance, what kinds of clothing are considered appropriate to wear for specific age groups, or the hair colour we expect someone of a particular age to have (Laz 93). I opted to explore these because they are not only a way in which more abstract expectations about age are condensed into concrete statements, they are also known to vary between individuals who – on paper – seem to otherwise have much in common (Joosen, "Introduction" 13). This led to age norms being accessible yet evocative anchors around which I could build discussions about readers' reflections on

themselves, their broader comments about society and their reflections on children's literature. In this dissertation, I have opted to explore four age norms that became particularly salient throughout my individual and group discussions with readers of all ages: innocence, wisdom, fantasy and imagination. Besides being often referred to in participants' reflections, these particular age norms were selected for analysis on account of them also being prominent topics in theoretical discussions on age and children's literature, while having been explored much less empirically (a.o. Kincaid 73; Nikolajeva, "Neuroscience" 27; Reeves 37; Pickard 180; Natov 3; Gubar, "Innocence" [1st edition] 122; Wilkie-Stibbs 358; Joosen, *Adulthood* 188; McDowell 51).

## Research question 2: When reading a children's book, what memories are prompted in readers of different ages, and do these memories shape empathic responses to characters?

Age, memory, and empathy are three engaging topics on their own but are also often linked in academic discourse. For instance, scholars who discuss empathy often point to memory as one source thereof (Stening and Stening 288; Keen 5; Caracciolo 130), while memory scholars have pointed out that the way the brain handles memories is subject to change over time and with age (Klingberg 42; Nikolajeva, "Neuroscience" 33), and narrative is often characterized as having "the potential to encourage empathy with often-marginalized others" (Mar and Oatley 181; see also Stephens vi; Whitehead 55). I combine these three topics into one research question, in an effort to empirically explore if and how readers of different ages use their memories to respond to characters, and whether these memories stimulate an empathic response.

Combined, research questions 1 and 2 attempt to increase our understanding of the pre-existing knowledge and ideas that readers of different ages bring to the reading experience.

## Research question 3: How do readers of different ages engage with the extraordinary activities that are included in David Almond's *My Name Is Mina*?

This research question was conceived later in the research process, after I had already conducted 40 interviews on *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen*. Upon completion of these traditional semi-structured interviews, I wanted to end the data-gathering stage of my research by exploring a different method to gain access to other kinds of data. To do this, I drew inspiration from research by Eva Fjällström and Lydia Kokkola, who have produced fascinating results by asking readers to rewrite short stories (396; 408). I consequently became interested in similarly exploring readers' creative responses to texts, and turned to David Almond's *My Name Is Mina* in pursuit of that goal. *My Name Is Mina* contains a

number of "extraordinary activities" for the reader to complete, such as "Take a line for a walk. Find out what you're drawing when you've drawn it." I designed a set of interviews about *My Name Is Mina* in which readers were asked to complete as many of the extraordinary activities as possible. These interviews thus had two goals. The main objective was to explore if and how readers of different ages engage differently with creative assignments prompted by a book. A secondary objective was to explore the merit of creative assignments as an alternative for classical semi-structured interviews as a method for qualitative reader-response data gathering.

### Research question 4: How do power, age and matter become enmeshed in readers' participation in a reader-response project on children's literature?

Readers do not experience books in a vacuum, nor did my participants experience their involvement in my research in one. Instead, the process of recruiting and interviewing participants was part of a complex web of interactions, both material and social. For some readers, this meant negotiating parental approval. For others, it meant tech-support by other family members was required. I designed research question 4 with the intent of zooming out to contextualize this more abstract dimension of my research project. I do this via a new materialist framework which urges us to "decenter ourselves" and "pay more attention to the wider worldly relationships that we're all enmeshed in and with" (Arndt et al. 6).

My dissertation develops each research question into an independent analysis, but collectively they operate as different vantage points from which the interaction between reader, book and the broader world can be understood. I like to think of them as opening four windows in an apartment building overlooking a meadow. Each window offers a uniquely distinct image, and collectively they supplement one another, while still only revealing a fraction of what is really out there. As such, I am not claiming that by developing and exploring these four research questions I have written the last word on how readers' ages affect their understanding of age in children's literature, but I do contend that the four aspects I have opted to emphasize do come together as a valuable and cohesive exploration of how readers' own ages shape their complex responses to age in children's literature, both individually, and in intergenerational interactions.

## The structure of this thesis

Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis outline my theoretical background and methodology, respectively. In studying readers, children's literature and age, this thesis exists on a crossroad between three academic disciplines: age studies, children's literature criticism and reader-response research. Chapter 1 situates my research in these fields and

highlights in more detail the core concepts and ideas that I borrow from each. Chapter 2 then establishes my methodology, i.e. how the interviews were organized, how participant recruitment worked and how I approached the development of the interview guides. In that section, I also reflect on the validity and representability of qualitative research, and comment on my positionality as a researcher (a.o. Cohen et al. 121; R.B. Johnson 284; Bhavnani et al 173).

Chapter 3 contains my analyses to answer the four research questions outlined above. To introduce additional structure in my discussion, I have grouped these four analyses into three chapters that each present a different vantagepoint from which to look towards the data. In my endeavor to answer how the age of the real reader affects the understanding of age in fiction for young readers, chapter 3.1. starts from the reader and discusses research question 1 and 2; chapter 3.2. starts from the book and discusses research question 3; and chapter 3.3. starts from interaction and connection and discusses research question 4. In the process of answering these questions, I will touch upon other relevant debates, including the role of didacticism in children's literature (Robichaud et al. 6; Beauvais, *Time* 109; see also Hunt, *Criticism* 28; Nikolajeva, *Power* 43; Nikolajeva, *Approaches* 2; Wilkie-Stibbs 356), the cultural construct of childhood as a time of "becoming" and adulthood as a time of "being" (Uprichard 305; Fitzpatrick 44; Heywood Epub), and the objectivity of the qualitative researcher (Denzin and Lincoln 40; R.B. Johnson 283; Brinkmann et al. 38; Janesick 305).

This PhD thesis is the culmination of 4 years' worth of work and half a million words in interviews and focus group transcripts. In the following chapters, I hope to contribute to our knowledge of how cultural products help us construct our identities. Throughout this dissertation I will emphasize very real "needs" and practical uses for the study of children's literature through a lens of age studies, such as the importance of increasing our understanding of how age-discourses take shape in light of the recent spike in intergenerational animosity, or why qualitative empirical research into children's literature is surprisingly rare. While these are all very good reasons and should rightfully be explored, I also want to affirm my own belief that curiosity is its own reward. Upon being asked why one would want to climb Mount Everest, George Mallory famously replied: "because it's there" (Sack). Though the stakes are admittedly less intense, I ascribe to the same spirit of desiring to know how age, children's literature and readers' responses are entwined – because we do not, and I feel deeply that we should.

# Chapter 1  **Theoretical Background**

The goal of this theoretical framework is to explore the specific knowledge-gap that exists at the cross-section between age studies, children's literature research and reader-response research – which my thesis aims to help fill. Each of these fields "talks" to each other in particular ways. Age studies may find fertile ground in children's books for the purposes of studying how various age groups are presented for a young audience; children's literature scholars may refer to reader-response theory to contextualize how (young) readers might experience these narratives; and reader-response researchers can borrow from age studies to increase their insight into how readers' ages affect how meaning is granted to narratives. In the midst of these overlapping discussions, a gap emerges: there has been little to no research that explores how the age of real readers affects their view on age in literature for young readers.

There are four major parts to this theoretical framework. In section 1.1., I introduce the concept and nuances of ageism by reflecting on the nature and prevalence of recent intergenerational conflict. The intent of that section is to establish more of the "why" of my research project. Following this introductory section, I reflect on the three core disciplines in which my own work is grounded: age studies (section 1.2.), children's literature research (section 1.3.) and reader-response studies (section 1.4.). My overviews of these fields are not comprehensive, but instead offer a more precise look at a select set of current debates, ideas and calls for further research that I then later draw on in my analyses and methodology.

## 1.1 Setting the scene

### 1.1.1 Ageism

In 1969, *Washington Post* reporter Carl Bernstein interviewed then 42-year-old psychiatrist Robert Butler for a story about the National Capital Housing Authority's decision to purchase an apartment complex and convert it into public housing, mainly for the older poor. That interview was one of the first times that the term "ageism" was used to talk about age-based prejudices (Achenbaum, "Ageism" 10). In the same year, Butler explored the concept further in an article titled "Age-Ism: Another Form of Bigotry". Despite the broad definition of ageism that Butler establishes there, as "prejudice by one age group toward other age groups" (R. Butler 243), he put most emphasis on prejudice against older people, for instance by remarking on a collective "revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, 'uselessness,' and death" (R. Butler 243).

Nevertheless, Butler's ageism threatens everyone: "[a]ge-ism is also seen in other groups. The young may not trust anyone over 30; but those over 30 may not trust anyone younger" (R. Butler 244). Andrew Achenbaum points out that "ageism predates Butler's naming of a syndrome endemic over time and across space" ("Ageism" 14). Nevertheless, Butler's naming of this "syndrome" provided researchers, critics and others with a shared theoretical vocabulary.

Following Butler's initial relatively broad definition, age scholars have further refined the concept of ageism to capture more specific examples. For instance, Sylvia Henneberg has explored both "reverse ageism" and "positive ageism"; the former entails "the systematic and monochromatic equation of youth with beauty and strength" ("Nexus" 130), while the latter "highlights exclusively such qualities as the wisdom, serenity, calm and maturity of the old" ("Creative "27). Some researchers suggest that positive ageism is more common than regular ageism (Chonody 213), and can be deceptively harmful, as it "appear[s] to be empathetic, but [is] actually paternalistic in nature and support[s] ageist behaviours, which can be detrimental to older adults" (Chonody 208). Others have talked about "compassionate ageism", which "conveys that economically assisting older adults is apparently generous, but also reinforces negative stereotypes of frailty, poverty and dependency" (Dykstra and Fleischmann 110). There are also evolutions of the concept which narrow down ageism to a specific age group. For instance, Margaret Morganroth Gullette uses "middle-ageism" to discuss middle aged workers who "are losing jobs or any hope of work" (230). Likewise, one recent (2021) study of "youngism" with over 2000 participants found that young people are seen as ungrateful, naïve, coddled and disrespectful. The authors go as far as remarking that "people harbor colder feelings toward today's young adults than toward any contemporary older age group, including old-old adults" (Francioli and North).

Yet, despite ageism's widespread presence in society and the academic interest in the phenomenon, it remains a struggle to create awareness about ageism among non-academic audiences. As Helma Van Lierop-Debrauwer writes: "most people in Western culture never reflect on ageism in the way they do on the other two categories of sex and race, the main reason being the institutionalization of ageing in society" (80). Age scholars have criticized and questioned narratives of aging and stereotypes of age that are uncritically repeated and reinforced in ways that would no longer be accepted if they instead disparaged race, sexual orientation or gender (Joosen, *Oud* 5). Gullette describes this difference in the perception of ageism compared to other "isms" as follows:

> Ageist hate speech is unlike other kinds in that it doesn't need to raise its voice. It doesn't yell: "Iron my shirt!" at Hillary Clinton or "Get out of your car slowly with your hands up" at someone driving while black. "We need young blood" is said in a

boss's enthusiastic can-do tone. When hate speech is ageist, it may seem harmless because we are less sensitized to its range of effects than to racism or ableism. (184)

One of the compounding factors here is that ageism is neither always explicit, nor does it always appear as obviously abusive behaviour. Instead, ageism can appear in "various and nuanced forms, each with unique impacts: Making jokes at an older person's expense is vastly different from hitting one's grandparents or stealing their assets and resources" (Achenbaum, "Ageism" 13). On the lighter side of things, Nelson points out that

> a cornerstone of the birthday greeting card industry is the message that it is unfortunate that one is another year older. While couched in jokes and humor, society is clearly saying one thing: getting old is bad. (208)

In other cases, ageist discourse becomes more aggressive. The term "silver tsunami" is often used to refer to the threat of a society with more older retired people than those who are part of the workforce, thus threatening the quality of life of young(er) people (a.o. Hubble and Tew 2, Segal 32, Santaulària i Capdevila 59, Gullette 1).[1]

## 1.1.2 Intergenerational conflict

As some scholars point out, this kind of ageist discourse has the added issue of engendering further intergenerational conflict

> Members of different generations are thus staged as competitors for scarce means, rather than as supportive allies striving for the same goal. In this atmosphere of crisis, the old are cast as selfish usurpers of the means that younger generations should be entitled to. (Joosen, "Introduction" 3)

The 2016 Brexit referendum is a straightforward example, with age being reported as a significant predictor of whether someone voted remain or leave (Joosen, "Introduction" 3; BBC "Referendum"; BBC "Brexit"). One article relays the bitterness of a university student who felt that "baby boomers have messed things up for us again" (Kelly). Furthermore, as this citation makes clear, there is a difference between ageist prejudice on the basis of biological age, e.g. aimed at adolescents or older people, and ageism leveled at age cohorts, e.g. millennials, zoomers, baby boomers or gen x-ers. In practice, the former suggests that there is a set of characteristics tied to being a certain age, and that as we move from age group to age group, we spontaneously adopt the relevant characteristics.

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[1] It should be noted here that this particular kind of discourse is amplified in countries with a proportionally higher share of old people, and there is significant international variation on that front. Monaco, Japan, Italy, Spain and Estonia all have median ages of over 40. Meanwhile, many African nations have a very young populace: Uganda, Niger, Mali, Benin and Burundi all have a median age of below 18 (CIA).

There is for instance the belief that ageing makes you more conservative, or as the adage goes: "Any man who is under 30, and is not a liberal, has no heart; and any man who is over 30, and is not a conservative, has no brains" (Tilley). Meanwhile, stereotypes that operate on the level of the age cohort tend to proclaim that – by virtue of being born at a particular time – one is tainted or blessed by whatever quality is ascribed to the age cohort as a whole. Some have characterized Baby Boomers as social innovators, pointing at accomplishments like their advocacy for lowering the voting age in the 1960s and 70s and their more recent rejection of compulsory retirement (Overall 92). Others describe them as "a powerful and arrogant demographic that controlled the media and had it in for innocent, smart, energetic, tech- savvy, worthy young Generation X" (Gullette 28).

People can have strong opinions on these stereotypes of age, and they tend to feel especially defensive when their own age group is stereotyped in a way they dislike. In Nick Hubble and Philip Tew's book *Ageing, Narrative and Identity*, they cite N1592, an unnamed older woman: "I am sick of the habitual representation of my group – passive, dependent, vulnerable, scroungers, a financial burden, ill, demented, a drain on the public purse, isolated, vulnerable, an escalating problem etc." (92). Aside from people's frustration about the portrayal of their own age group, some scholars are concerned about the negative and lasting impact that problematic depictions of age may have for a young audience. In a personal reflection, age critic Margaret Gullette shares her fear that through encountering negative stereotypes about old age, her four-year-old granddaughter Vivi will "hoard some of the bad stuff inside, to turn against herself later. It may taint her imagination, damage her perceptions, and spoil her expectations of life" (6) – and that concern is justified. Empirical research has repeatedly indicated that young children already have internalized beliefs on age, some of which can be problematic. At the very least, three to four-year-old children have been shown to have a distinct awareness of being different from adults, emphasizing the importance of play and the belief in childhood innocence (Lowe 274-275). In terms of antagonism towards other age groups, scholars have also demonstrated the presence of (negative) normative ideas about age in childhood, as children as young as three years old showed "stereotypic attitudes" towards the old (Powell and Arquitt 422; Golub et al. 277), while "children as young as 4 years indicated a strong preference for younger adults" (Montepare and Zebrowitz 82). The adoption of such perspectives may then inform views on intergenerational interaction.

On its own, the prevalence and impact of ageism makes for a compelling motivator to study cultural meaning-making about age – one factor of which is (children's) literature. However, ageism is only one facet of the intricate and nuanced socio-cultural meaning-making process through which an individual or group constructs their ideas of age. In that regard, ageism will remain an important concept throughout my analyses of the interview

data in this thesis, but I also highlight how literature can provide – and readers can respond to – nuanced portrayals of members of various age groups (Van Lierop-Debrauwer 77; also see Apseloff 80; Santaulària i Capdevila 60), and narratives of intergenerational friendship (Joosen, *Adulthood* 188). Thus, this thesis also zooms out beyond ageism specifically, and discusses age more broadly as a social construct resulting from a complicated meaning-making process between an individual and their environment. To do this, I draw heavily from the academic discipline of age studies to frame and understand readers' reflections on their own age and the age of characters in children's literature. Thus, the next section of my theoretical framework will zoom out beyond ageism specifically, and reflect on age studies as a larger discipline in which age is explored as a sociocultural construct that is historically malleable and situated.

## 1.2 Age studies: the social construction of age

The broader aim of this section of my theoretical framework is to set up the general perspective on age that informs my analyses and from which I draw throughout this thesis. I will develop this perspective in three steps. I begin by exploring what it means to argue that age is a social construct, and the implications this has for how age is conceptualized. Then, I apply this reasoning to the "tripartite lifecourse", i.e. the standardized division of the human lifespan into childhood, adulthood and old age. Via reflections on various scholars from age studies and adjacent fields, I comment on how these categories have shifted over time and how they are conceptualized now. Finally, I reflect on the role literature can play in this process, in a section that also functions as a bridge to the next core discipline for this thesis: children's literature criticism. For the purposes of my own later analyses, this section thus sets up the basic argument of age's socio-cultural variability, which I will then later build on with more specific observations using readers' reflections on their own age and the age of characters.

Since the late 1980s, the notion that age is "socially constructed" has become a widely cited argument in scholarly texts that investigate age in cultural products, such as children's literature, television, film, and marketing campaigns (see a.o. Gallagher 28; Heywood epub; Hendrick 57; Sparrman 228; Van Lierop – Debrauwer 79). For example, Cecilia Lindgren and Johanna Sjöberg start their analysis of the portrayal of intergenerational contact between children and older people in the tv-show *Mad Men* by establishing that "age is socially constructed […] and so are the borders for childhood and senescence" (186). More historically oriented discussions study specific changes to these constructs that were triggered by particular circumstances. For instance, after referring to the increasing importance of education and schooling at the end of the nineteenth century, Jeylan Mortimer and Phyllis Moen add that "the social construction of the child's

role was thus fundamentally altered" (113). Alternatively, Carmel Gallagher has written about the "changing social construction of old age" (28) in the context of several contributing factors such as "the emergence of the Third Age" (28), which I will return to later in this thesis.

So, what does it mean when we say that age is "socially constructed"? Though particular scholars and sub-disciplines will add their own nuances, and there are differences between "strong/radical and weak social" constructionist perspectives (Lorraine Green [1ˢᵗ edition] 74), a social constructionist argument of age generally stresses the "nurture" aspect; it does not deny ageing as a biological process (Joosen, *Adulthood* 9; Pickard 51; Solberg 123), but conceives of the outward appearance and enactment of age as a set of acquired "[c]ulturally defined identificatory displays" such as "clothing style, hair color, posture [and] social roles," which are contingent on social and historical circumstances (Laz 93). Put simply, a social constructivist argument of age proposes that what we consider to be appropriate age-related behaviour and interactions is not purely biological fact, but at least in part a result of socio-cultural conditioning (Egan and Hawkes 314). This conditioning then makes all sorts of social pressures and dynamics seem natural, even though they are in fact artificial constructs, such as the way in which we divide the life course into distinct phases and the expectations that are tied to those phases, political decisions such as (mandated) retirement ages and the associated pensions, or alternatively, whether children are expected to work, just to name a few.

In *The Social Construction of What?*, Ian Hacking summarizes the prototypical structure of a social constructivist argument. Most of these analyses – Hacking suggests – start from a particular precondition: "In the present state of affairs, *X* is taken for granted; *X* appears to be inevitable" (12). In Hacking's phrasing, the intent is for the reader to replace "x" with a topic of choice that is argued to be a social construct. Hacking then argues that "[s]ocial constructionists about *X* tend to hold that: *X* need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. *X,* or *X* as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable" (6). Thus, in the next two sections, I want to take Hacking's summary as starting points to explore what – according to a variety of scholars - happens when we fill in "age" for "x". In the first section, I begin by highlighting the taken-for-granted nature of age, and point to the work of various scholars who have questioned that naturalized status, drawing comparisons with gender and race. Using that angle, I then introduce age studies as an interdisciplinary field invested in exploring the socio-cultural meaning-making processes that shape how age is interpreted and reinterpreted. In the second section, I briefly touch upon the complexity of this process by listing several factors that complicate or interact with how age is given meaning, such as other identity markers or the body itself.

### 1.2.1 **"In the present state of affairs, *age* is taken for granted; *age* appears to be inevitable."**

People care about age. It is one of the identity markers that is "fundamental to social perception" (Nelson 207). Together with race and gender, it is sometimes referred to as a "primitive" or "automatic" identity marker, because humans are so attuned to noticing them and categorizing people accordingly (Nelson 207). Merry Perry summarizes the importance of age for our sense of identity as follows:

> Parents know the exact age of their unborn and then newborn child, young children feel quite proud when they finally reach the next birthday and become a "big" boy or girl, teens wait anxiously for the magical age of twenty-one, and adults discuss how many years separate husband and wife. In spite of the notion that it is impolite to ask a person's age, the media frequently identifies people first by their name, then by their age. We learn, whether or not we really care, the age of important world figures, presidents, and all celebrities. (203)

Yet, despite the importance of age in our day to day lives, society at large rarely, if ever, questions or criticizes the norms, values and meanings we attach to – or legitimize through –age. For decades, age scholars have criticized this collective tendency to take age "for granted," or see it as "inevitable," often in combination with comments about the "institutionalization" or "naturalization" of age. For instance, age scholar Susan Pickard has criticized the prevalent view of "positing age as something natural and inevitable" (47; see also Laz 90; Van Lierop-Debrauwer 80; Featherstone and Hepworth 357). Likewise, using a concept introduced by Roland Barthes, age scholars Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes point out that the way society handles age essentially grants it an "exnominated status" (312). A particular phenomenon is exnominated when it "evades the need for explication and cultural critique due to its taken-for-granted and naturalised status" (312).

The split that sometimes exists between what academic sociological research suggests, and laypeople's "common sense" beliefs seems to be particularly pronounced regarding age – in part because lay beliefs "often resort to the individual or their biology, rarely considering social factors" (Lorraine Green [2nd edition] 16; see also Laz 85), hence the common references to what is in someone's "nature," or what is "natural." This may produce tension between laypeople, for whom "identity markers, most notably age, gender, and race, are often thought to be biologically determined" and "critical gender and age studies" which, in contrast, "have driven the message home that they are in fact defined by culture rather than nature, as becomes manifest in their historical variability" (Wesseling 61; see also Nelson 208; Golub et al. 277; Laz 85-88). Compared to other identity markers, age remains "a facet of human experience that many—particularly in

youth-centered Western cultures of the twenty-first century—are keen to resist, repress, or ignore" (Port and Swinnen 1). As Devoney Looser proclaimed: "gender, race, class, nation, and sexuality […]. Age belongs on that list. Age must be added to that list" (26).

Enter age studies, an interdisciplinary field that has flourished in the last decade, and which "aims to address the whole of life" (Segal 31) sometimes wittily summarized as from "womb to tomb" (Achenbaum, "Torch" 50) or "from cradle to grave" (Segal 26). Andrea Charise described age studies as "relatively speaking, a new subfield of the humanities and qualitative social sciences concerned with the matter of age and aging" (11). It counts in its ranks scholars from a range of disciplines such as history, medical humanities, sociology, kinesiology, cultural studies, biology, gerontology and anthropology (Marshall; Joosen, "Second Childhoods" 126). Part of age studies' strength lies in that interdisciplinarity, as it is able to draw from all these perspectives to explore the ways in which age is *not* necessarily "determined by the nature of things" or "inevitable." Instead, age studies refuses to "take age for granted," and drives us to question our assumptions and beliefs involving age, and by extension exploring matters of inequality and injustice (Haynes and Murris, "Post-age" 976). In an interview with Leni Marshall, sociologist Toni Calasanti characterized age studies as: "inherently activist, a means by which to challenge the status quo, question the images one tends to take for granted, interrogate the ways that perceptions shape policy and care work, and explore how social forces impact individual outcomes" (Marshall).

### 1.2.2 "*Age* need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. *Age*, or *age* as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable."

In a way, age studies' interdisciplinarity is not simply a strength, it can also be argued to be a necessity, as the socio-cultural shaping of age is threaded through many different aspects of society. Age is not only given meaning in a similar way as gender or other identity markers, it is given meaning *in dialogue with* those other identity markers. For example, Achenbaum describes how "a gender bias persists over time and across space in characterizing senescence, which is more detrimental to women than to men" ("Historical Perspectives" 24). Note for instance, that men are seven times more likely to qualify for the full state pension in the UK, thus "exacerbating the feminization of poverty" (Pickard 42; see also Wesseling 62).

Constructions of age also operate on several different societal levels, which may strengthen or counteract each other. They can function on the level of the individual family (Solberg 124), the nation-state (Hendrick 42), within class-based structures (Gullette 31; Silva 508; Radl 769; Furstenberg 2), but also on much higher-level abstract cultural

generalizations such as "the West" or the "third world" (Boyden 187). Furthermore, age is experienced in an interactive, social context. Sparrman writes about the "enactment" of age, remarking how age is "done and made—in and through social practice" (243). Exploring the dynamic nature of age categories, Sparrman points out that the "age eleven can, for example, be enacted as immature and problematic in a presumed love relationship between an eleven- and a seventeen-year-old, while at the same time being performed as reliable and informed when talking with a researcher" (244). Similarly, Anne Solberg noted that 10 to 12-year-old Norwegian children "increase their social age" by negotiating the use of domestic space when their parents are not home. These children may choose their clothing, cook for themselves, invite friends etc. (137). Furthermore, the way age is given meaning rarely constitutes a cohesive network of ideas that logically build on one another (Joosen, "Introduction" 8). One may affirm older adults' value as wise teachers of children (Gallagher 29), while simultaneously seeing them as a "burden" that depletes social security (Featherstone and Hepworth 357; Achenbaum, "Ageism" 12; See also Wesseling 61; Radl 764-768).

Finally, a focus on the cultural dynamics of age does not entail a refusal to acknowledge the physical body. As Gullette writes, "If something happens in or on the body, culture is what names it [and] tells us how we are supposed to feel about what is named" (101). Thus, the physical and the social are not opposites but rather two sides of the same coin. Think for example of the bent-over and hunched body stereotypically ascribed to old age. While some would be eager to explain this purely through biologically induced feebleness – which may be the actual case for some older people – there are also older adults who may find value in "presenting oneself strategically as enfeebled" (Pickard 51). In that regard, recognizing that social expectations about the physical body may cause some people to voluntarily play up to those stereotypes for various reasons, does not mean denying that "'real' bodies yield to 'real' time-related changes" (Pickard 51). Scholars instead propose that the goal should be to find a balance between essentialist perspectives that ground human identity purely in fundamental selfhood or biology, i.e. "nature," and the notion that we are completely determined by our social environment, i.e. "nurture" (McCallum 6). Though the focus on age is more recent, John Dewey was already writing in the late 1930s how "[w]e need to know the ways in which social contexts react back into biological processes as well as to know the ways in which the biological processes condition social life" (qtd. In Katz 18). This thesis engages in that effort.

The next section will apply this perspective to childhood, adulthood and old age as naturalized categories. The point is to highlight how these categories are in fact historically and culturally malleable, while exploring some of the core tensions that highlight this malleability. As part of this discussion, I will already introduce some of the concepts that

will return in my own later analyses of the interview data, such as "aetonormativity" or the destandardization of the life-course.

## 1.2.3 **The tripartite life course: childhood, adulthood and old age**

Since antiquity, the life course has been divided in the three distinct phases of childhood, adulthood and old age, sometimes referred to as the "tripartite" life course. By virtue of its deep cultural entrenchment, the "naturalness" of the tripartite life course is often left unquestioned. However, the child-adult-old adult transitions are arbitrary in the sense that they are "not based on universal biological progressions" (Mortimer and Moen 111). Ethnographic and socio-historical research has shown that the age when someone is considered a "child," "adult" or "old adult" has not only changed across time but continue to be different across cultures (Ariès 128; Pickard 80; Lindgren and Sjöberg 186). From a historical perspective, the tripartite life course – in its current incarnation – reinvents some older constructions of age, while incorporating modern features. As for some of its older roots, tripartite structures of the life course existed in the past as well[2] but competed with interpretations that saw aging as a cycle (M.L. Johnson 565), or as a rising and falling staircase, some with nine or more separate stages (Achenbaum, "Historical Perspectives" 23).

Each of these stages ("childhood," "adulthood" and "old age") has a history of responding to socio-cultural and economic pressures, as "the meanings and practices of age and aging changed from decade to decade, generation to generation, or century to century" (Looser 26). Most attention in these areas has been paid to childhood and old age; sociologies of adulthood are much rarer (Pickard 78). However, the absence of research is arguably part of the social construct. Marah Gubar writes how "we generally regard adulthood as the normal and preferred state of being" ("Hermeneutics" 297), a phenomenon for which Maria Nikolajeva coined the term "aetonormativity" (*Power*, 8). The normal is questioned and researched less than the different or "other." Blatterer blames this in part on the "embodied reality of sociologists" who are predominantly middle adults themselves, with their own "memories of childhood" and "fear of ageing" ("Redefinition" 2.2), hence the attention those stages get, while middle-adulthood is seen as self-evident. Common stereotypes about age tend to describe childhood or old age and only rarely adulthood – and when they do, they do not emphasize powerlessness as much as stereotypes about

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[2] One early example of a tripartite view on the life course can be found in *The Education of a Christian Woman*, a sixteenth-century work in which the author proclaimed the existence of a "triad" of life stages for women: "either virgins, wives, or widows" (Reeves 45). With some leeway, and leaving aside the repressive sexism of the time, these stages can even loosely be argued to be precursors for the main themes of "preparation, family building and work, and retirement" which would later be mapped onto childhood, adulthood and old age (Dykstra and Fleischman 107).

youth and old age do (Nelson 216). Thus, as we have grown to understand childhood and old age as separate stages, adulthood's meaning changed as its reach across one's life was reduced and fragmented (Hareven 124). Only after we have defined and given meaning to these other stages, can we once again take stock of adulthood. Therefore, I will now shift attention to exploring some key aspects of childhood and old age's social construction, before returning to adulthood.

### 1.2.3.1 *The social construction of childhood*

Scholars from various disciplines have outlined the myriad ways in which "the definition of childhood shifts, even within a small, apparently homogenous culture" (Hunt, *Criticism* 59). As part of that discourse, Phillipe Ariès's 1962 claim that "in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist" (128) is often cited by age and children's literature scholars, for purposes of both support and criticism (see a.o. Lowe 269; Beauvais, *Time* 7; Kincaid 62; Rudd, "Exist" 20; Pickard 70; Reeves 35; Mortimer and Moen 113; Haynes and Murris, "Post-age" 975; Hollindale 13; Heywood; Overall 85; Hareven 120). While scholars disagree on the extent to which medieval society had a concept of childhood, the core idea of Ariès's argument still rings true: what we now consider to be typical of "children" and "childhood" is not the same as in medieval times. In fact, childhood is a highly mobile concept, and even among those scholars who agree that childhood "did not exist" in medieval times, consequent attempts to then trace its origin has led to "many of them proposing an alternative 'discovery of childhood', either before, during or after the seventeenth century" (Heywood). The origins of childhood are thus debatable, but key changes in its conceptualization can be tied to the socio-cultural forces of particular historical periods in particular geographic locations. Of course, this does not mean that each culture has a wholly unique view of childhood, but to some small or great extent, different emphases will be placed. To borrow Harry Hendrick's phrasing: "definitions of childhood must to some extent be dependent upon the society from which they emerge" (34; see also Robichaud et al. 4).

In the pursuit of demonstrating this, scholars have explored the historical variability of childhood across cultural units great and small.[3] Hendrick has traced how – since the 1800s – the British construction of childhood evolved in response to socio-cultural and economic stimuli. He sketches an initial progression from the "natural child," grounded in the writings and ideas of Rousseau, to the "Romantic child" influenced by poets such as Blake, followed by seven more distinct phases in between – such as the "Evangelical Child" (37),

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[3] Focusing on the broader Anglophone world, Judith Plotz writes about nineteenth-century culture's conflicted response to the growing number of children which survived infancy. She describes the contrast between those who saw excess children as "unnecessary-indeed as potentially damaging" (4) and those for whom these same children became "the idol of an age from which a transcendent God was disappearing" (5).

"Delinquent Child" (41) and "Schooled Child" (43) – before reaching contemporary childhood (54). Importantly, Hendrick does not characterize these shifts as full resets, and points out aspects of these constructions of childhood which were retained across iterations. In fact, various terms exist to describe related constructions of childhood. Plotz uses the "Superfluous Child" and the "Essential Child" as shorthands for hers (4). Chris Jenks notably coined the Dionysian and Apollonian Child (73-78; see also Pickard 180; Lorraine Green [1st edition] 76), while Pickard references the Savage Child and Abused Child (181).

The experience of childhood within the same cultural units is not necessarily internally homogenous. Modern-day childhood can be vastly different depending "on the influence of numerous complex and intersecting factors such as family background, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sex, gender, age, education, geographic location, and access to media" (Robichaud et al. 3). In short, there is no universal construct of childhood, and oftentimes those that exist in one particular culture are somewhat vague, strained concepts that embody opposing tensions.[4] In contemporary discourse, children are "in need of constant protection and surveillance" for some (Overall 89), and deserving of "a more adult and autonomous status" for others (Lorraine Green [1st edition] 77). All of this can be summarized in Aidan Chambers' observation that

> "The people" do not exist, any more than "the child" […] exists. What does exist are people, individuals living together in various and multifarious relationships, among whom are some living in a state we call childhood, a condition of human life that is far from singular and that is not at all the stable, quantifiable, and describable entity some of us think it is. ("Difference" 3)

### 1.2.3.2 *The social construction of old age*
The basic structure of this argument about childhood also holds for the social construction of old age. Achenbaum remarks how "perspectives on ageing do not always mirror senescence's realities [and] arise from political, social, economic, cultural and demographic factors that shape a particular society at a specific historical moment" ("Historical perspectives" 21). Historically, there has been a tension between those who look to older

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[4] if we zoom out, there are a wealth of ways in which western constructs of childhood do not always align with those of other cultures. Over the last century, the expansion of education has meant that in the west, "the central task of the child's life was increasingly seen as attending school" (Mortimer and Moen 113; See also Pickard 37). This is – however – not the case everywhere. As Jo Boyden remarks, it is a "mistaken assumption that if parents had a choice they would always send their children to school and that it is poverty that forces children to work" (207). She then offers an interesting contrast between Britain and Peru:

> In the former it is illegal to leave infants and small children in charge of juveniles under the age of 14. In the latter, on the other hand, the national census records a significant group of 6 to 14 year olds who are heads of households and as such are the principal breadwinners in the family (Boyden 199)

people for wisdom and leadership, and those who see them as a burden. On the one hand, Malcolm Johnson points out how "in the great religious and associated ethical literature of the past three millennia, old age holds a place of dignity, authority and respect" (563). On the other hand, Achenbaum offers a historic overview of a "seemingly universal, widespread contempt for old people" which preaches the "futility of granting the aged access to care" as their death is imminent anyway, and care is thus a waste of resources ("Ageism" 11-12).

One significant factor that shapes how old people are perceived in a particular time and place, is the availability of resources. Various cultures across the globe relay stories of killing old people in times of scarcity ("Khazar" 238; Lee 130; Leighton and Hughes 328; Magnier). It is important to note that the veracity of some of these practices has been called into question. Gullette specifically calls out the "Eskimo on the ice floe" as a "myth" (22). However, Gullette also adds that "As an age critic, the truthiness of this story is important to me and not its truth" (22). The widespread circulation of these kinds of narratives across geographically diverse cultures, even if not rooted in actual practice, points to a readiness to recast old people as dead weight once resources become scarce, no matter how much we claim that "[e]ven frail older people have something to offer […]; accumulated knowledge and wisdom of life experience which they can dispense through stories, patient and calm attention, tolerance and humour" (Gallagher 34).

Beyond this contrast between older people as a source for guidance and leadership, and as a drain on resources, the early to mid-twentieth century saw rapid and intense change to constructions of old age around the globe. In part, this was caused by older people simply being around in larger numbers as lengthened lifespans and revolutions in medical science increased the number of old people in society: "until recently, few human beings attained old age. The paucity of elders consigned them the role of 'strangers' in the land of the young" (Achenbaum, "Historical Perspectives" 24). In addition, various socio-cultural and economic changes engendered how these larger numbers of old people were treated, such as the adoption of state-funded pensions and the related concept of retirement (Achenbaum, "Historical Perspectives" 23-24) – the latter being a contested topic. Pickard writes how retirement "has always been used as a device for regulating the labour supply in the interests of the employers" (35), and that it helps society to construct "old age in a state of dependency (through compulsory retirement and low state pensions)" and then "blam[e] the old for this" (49).[5] However, research has also shown that in their retirement,

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[5] Christine Overall shares the "grief experienced by those who were ejected from their jobs against their will, and by the very real loss to the institution itself of the tremendous teaching ability […] of these people" (89).

many older adults use this time to care for their grandchildren, which has the potential for various positive effects for both grandparent and grandchild (Gallagher 30-33).

The experience of retirement of course hinges in part on family ties, and in that regard old age has become much more of a solitary experience for some people. Comparing western pre-industrial society to the twentieth century, Tamara Hareven remarks how "old people experienced economic and social segregation far less frequently than they do today" (124). For better or worse, the care of older people used to be the responsibility of the family (M.L. Johnson 564; Hareven 129), which would often work through multi-generational households. While recent articles point to a small increase in multi-generational households over the last decade, they also acknowledge that they remain much rarer than they were a century or more ago, with only one fifth of the United States population living in one (Wagner and Luger 1). This is exacerbated by the fact that families are also "more geographically dispersed" than ever before (Gallagher 26). Furthermore, the general scarcity of multi-generational households has not been compensated by intergenerational friendships. Recent research in the EU found that "young adults with friends over the age of 70, and older adults with friends under the age of 30 are minority groups within their respective age categories," with less than one third of people across 25 European countries reporting "two or more cross-age friendships" (Dykstra and Fleischmann 118). One key contributing factor here is what some scholars refer to as "age segregation" (a.o. Powell and Arquitt 421; Dykstra and Fleischmann 107; Gallagher 30; Van Lierop-Debrauwer 89). As Titterington et al. remark, "we are increasingly segregated by our structures and institutions on the basis of age" (121).

In the most direct sense, this is of course detrimental to older adults, but at the same time this can be construed as a loss for the young (and middle aged as well), through the disappearance of previously commonplace intergenerational interaction. Not only are "many young people […] growing up with little or no opportunity to have meaningful relationships with the elderly" (Powell and Arquitt 421), this lack of contact may also engender ageism. Some scholars remark that it "is reasonable to assume that the lack of intergenerational connection […] will lead to a lack of understanding and respect for one another" (Titterington et al. 122).

### 1.2.3.3 *The social construction of adulthood (and the fragmentation of the life course)*
While there are always different constructs of age at play within one society, some tend to be dominant. Several scholars point at the importance of the period between the end of World War Two and the 1970s oil crises for our current view on adulthood:

the standardized adulthood young people tend to be judged against existed in a short period between the Second World War and the 1973 OPEC oil crisis, during which labour market stability enabled gendered heterosexual nuclear family formation and employment entry to be relatively fixed in time. (Lorraine Green [1st edition] 131; see also Blatterer, "Redefinition" 3.5)

Scholars have amassed lists of the "objective achievements" of adulthood: "stable fulltime work, stable relationships, independent living and parenthood" (Blatterer, "Redefinition" 1.2). These are then condensed into the "standardized adulthood" that Lorraine Green emphasised as emerging after the Second World War ([1st edition] 131). Sociologists highlight how modern expectations regarding age

can be both enabling and restrictive: they help individuals to find their way, providing a frame, which helps individuals to 'psychologically manage their life courses' without being overburdened in making their decisions [...] at the same time, they may also force individuals to abide by the main stream pattern. (Van Bavel and Nitsche 1150)

However, in the last few decades, the stability of this model has been compromised by what scholars refer to as the "de-institutionalization" (Lorraine Green [1st edition] 128), "devolution" (Blatterer, "Devolving" 45) or "fragmentation" (Gilleard 158) of the life course – an evolution symptomatic of a broader cultural shift. Jennifer Silva remarks how the "decline of traditional markers of identity has also been of central concern within the broader sociological literature on changing foundations of selfhood in post-industrial society" (506; see also Blatterer, "Redefinition" 3.5). Due to a variety of circumstances including the rise of the service industry at the cost of manufacturing and industrial jobs (Furstenberg 2; Silva 506; Blatterer, "Devolving" 48), the democratization of education (Furstenberg 2), various demographic evolutions such as lowering birth rates (Boyden 189; Hubble and Tew 2; M.L. Johnson 563), smaller family size (Hareven 125), and the increasing emphasis of "the needs [and] desires of the individual [...] over collective and social groupings" (Gallagher 26), the experience of age has become more and more an unpredictable and individual process, instead of the comparatively higher collective adherence to specific age-bound expectations (Gilleard 159).

As a result, the normative view of what an "adult" is or should be like has once again started to shift. The three traditional categories of childhood, adulthood and old age have fractured into smaller subcultures and movements, with various new life stages coming to the fore, such as "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 469), "encore adulthood" (Mortimer and Moen 115), the Third and Fourth age (Gallagher 28) and "kidults" (Blatterer, "Redefinition" 3.2). Recurring themes in conceptualising these categories are choice and freedom, which

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is sometimes framed as a positive development compared to the restrictions imposed by the collective adherence to prior constructs. However, there are drawbacks as well, such as the uncertainty stemming from the disappearance of a framework for guiding one's choices, and the increasing difficulty – most of all for younger people – to actualize the construct of successful adulthood they envision.

Take for instance what is happening with "emerging adulthood," a new phase in the life course coined by Jeffrey Arnett in the early 2000s to describe Americans in their early twenties. Arnett describes this phase as a bit of an odd one out: instead of being marked by a particular set of expectations, it is "the only period of life in which nothing is normative demographically" (471). Arnett reflects on living arrangements, employment, education and relationship status to point to the diversity of experience that is inherent to this life stage, remarking that the "heterogeneity of emerging adulthood" (477) is precisely what sets it apart. Describing the same dynamic, Christine Overall remarked how, "people in the decade or so past adolescence are granted more freedom and fewer responsibilities than in the past" (85). She ascribes this change – among other things – to economic evolutions such as the "declining availability of low-skill jobs" (85). For some this means they stay in education longer, consequently delaying certain traditional rites of passage into adulthood, including accompanying responsibilities such as parenthood and marriage (Blatterer, "Redefinition" 3.1). That being said, more recent empirical research centred on this life stage suggests that this freedom for exploration is limited to predominantly white emerging adults from a financially stable background. Through a compounding of dietary, educational and social disadvantages, among others, "youth from less advantaged homes are distinctly less well positioned to accomplish […] markers of adulthood than their more privileged peers" (Furstenberg 3; see also Silva 506). For example, more and more young people are postponing parenthood (Van Bavel and Nitsche 1149) or are not having children at all. They are thus both not meeting the old "objective achievements" of adulthood (Blatterer, "Redefinition" 1.2), and consequently de facto changing what it means to be an adult.

On the other end of adulthood, the border between adulthood and old age has also blurred slightly on account of this life course fragmentation. Chris Gilleard describes how "[b]y the early 1980s […] resisting ageing – began to emerge as a new theme within contemporary culture [.] Those who had been young in the 1960s were reluctant to forfeit the benefits of youth" (158). Consequently, the 80s saw the emergence of the "Third Age." This stage in the life course is "characterized by comparative good health, financial security and freedom from front-line work and parenting responsibilities" (Gallagher 28). As a result, it is seen as a new time for growth and positive change (Pickard 198) and is intended to be contrasted with the Fourth Age, a time of physical and mental decline that

culminates in death (Gallagher 28). Some related terms in this context are "gerontolescence" or "encore adulthood," both of which emphasize a new period of fun and self-fulfilment (Mir).

For some, the Third Age is an extension of adulthood, not the beginning of old age. The argument is that "[w]ith greater longevity and better health, older adults are experiencing a longer middle age" (Mir). The implication of that strand of reasoning is that "old age" fundamentally entails decline and decrepitude, so those who are chronologically older but healthy have not yet reached the stage of "old adulthood." FS1560, one of the older people cited by Hubble and Tew, remarks how "With luck, following retirement there's a good period of freedom, busyness, activity before one really begins to feel old [...]. It is health that matters; I didn't feel old until I began to lose my sight" (90-91).

Thus, the line between the Third and Fourth age is often not expressed as a concrete chronological age, but revolves in large part around health and well-being. The Third Age has evolved as an "'in between' stage between conventional adulthood [...] and the frailties acquired as individuals approach old age" (Mortimer and Moen 117). Age scholars sometimes refer to this as the "compression of morbidity" (Lorraine Green [1st edition] 181; Gullette 22), where the goal becomes to cram "the time spent ill or disabled" into as short a period as possible, living a happy, active life followed by the briefest possible period of decline before death, thus representing "a radical departure from the idea [that] chronic disability and disease characterize old age" (Lorraine Green [1st edition] 181). Some remark that it is these "elastic boundaries" that make old age "the most heterogeneous stage of life" (Achenbaum, "Historical Perspectives" 25).

In this whole dynamic, class and age overlap again. As Malcolm Johnson remarks, the

> rich and powerful usually age later in all societies. Command over economic resources, superior living conditions and elevated status enable some to evade the label 'old', whilst their poorer contemporaries, disabled by harder lives, become sick and dependent (565)

There is a parallel with emerging adulthood in the sense that the growth and room for experimentation provided by the Third Age tends to be restricted to the educated (upper) middle-class (Mortimer and Moen 115), as "the benefits of 'de-institutionalization' of the life course, [are] enjoyed by the middle-class" above all (Pickard 40). This leaves adulthood as a stage roughly in the middle of one's life, with "taken-for granted, yet illusory [...] borders between socially constructed stages of life" on either side of it (Orellana et al. 185). One aspect that sets the construction of (middle) adulthood apart is that it is often treated as the default human condition, and therefore questioned and problematized less than other stages in life. Nevertheless, adulthood is also affected by the radical changes in

how childhood and old age are constructed, and is "no longer the time of stable certainties it used to be but partakes in the risk and fluctuations of all other phases of life" (Pickard 79).

### 1.2.4 **The importance of new role models and the potential of literature**

In the *Handbook of the Life Course*, Jeyland Mortimer and Phyllis Moen explore the implications of the emergence of these new "phases" in the life course for how we make sense of our identities. They note how a lack of "cultural traditions and role models" for these new stages in life may make it more difficult for individuals and groups to navigate them (117). Simply put, a person in their twenties may experience difficulties understanding and giving meaning to their own age when the traditional role models they encounter in media portray adulthood in a way that is no longer compatible with their own experience.

Age scholars regularly highlight the importance of narrative for how we grant meaning to the ageing process. Stephen Katz writes how "[n]arrative is particularly important because it anchors the inside of aging, bringing together self and society and animating our biographies as we borrow, adapt, interpret, and reinvent the languages, symbols, and meanings around us to customize our personal stories" (20; see also King and Horrocks 218). This matters because the recent fragmentation and destandardization of the life course has meant that some of us "lack an adequate backstory" (Gullette 5). In a time of both intergenerational tension and life course fragmentation, people of all ages can face ageist stereotyping, while older positive images of ageing do not always reflect some people's lived reality anymore. Thus, there remains – perhaps now more than ever – a need for deepening our insight into how the cultural products we create and consume contribute to the contemporary discourse about age and ageing, and how individuals respond to those narratives.

Literature becomes a particularly compelling object of study here, as it plays a role in introducing, challenging and reinforcing stereotypes of age. It is of course only one of many contributing factors, but I would argue it is a fascinating and important one. In Joseph Appleyard's exploration of the reader's experience of fiction across the lifespan, he offers the reflection that "[r]eading is a prime tool at one's disposal for gathering and organizing information about the wider world and learning how that world works" (59). Yet, it is not purely the written word that he is referring to here, it is indeed the more abstract concept of stories and narrative. Similarly, Rudine Sims Bishop remarks how "[u]nlike textbooks […] literature educates the heart as well as the head. It offers pleasure and enjoyment, as well as insights into what it means to be a decent human being in a society" (Bishop XIV). In other words, people take things away from their readings, not only

with regards to knowledge, but also affective sensations (feelings, beliefs, sympathies or affections).

Hence, the study of literature opens up several doors into research on age, ageism and intergenerational relations. In fact, a range of age and literature scholars have produced fascinating work exploring how, across time and age groups, authors have portrayed age or incorporated discourses on age in their books (a.o. Apseloff; Beauvais, *Time*; Henneberg, "Creative"; Hubble and Tew; Joosen, *Adulthood*; Lenker; Santaulària i Capdevila; F. Butler). This dissertation continues this tradition by focusing on one particular kind of literature: literature for young readers/children's literature.

In closing, the core takeaway from this section is that age is socially constructed and that that construction occurs in relation to broader socio-cultural factors, personal identity markers, and biological realities of the human body. Additionally, taken-for-granted categories such as "adulthood" became fragmented in recent years, further increasing the importance of exploring the cultural narratives on age that people of all ages are exposed to. This section also introduced several concepts such as aetonormativity, emerging adulthood and the third/fourth age, which are significant for my later analyses.

In conducting my analyses of the interview data in chapter 3 of this thesis, I utilize both a social constructivist lens on age, and several of the concepts outlined in this section. I do want to explicitly acknowledge that the readers I quote in my data analysis chapter are not age scholars, and therefore did not actively reference concepts such as "aetonormativity" or "ageism." These are concepts I apply to the data to identify and describe patterns. In my chapter on methodology, I reflect on my own positionality and its impact on the results of my analysis and their presentation. That being said, readers also did not offer their reflections in a vacuum. By exploring the above context here, I establish a foundation to continue building on as part of my analysis of the interview data in chapter 3 of this thesis.

## 1.3 Children's literature criticism: books written for children as a vibrant source for age-discourse

This section will explore why children's literature in particular is so suited as an object of study for research on age. More specifically, the first part of this section will explore what sets children's literature apart from other kinds of literature, with a particular emphasis on how questions of age are interwoven with its production and consumption. The second part will then reflect on the narratives themselves, by highlighting how information on age is part of the didactic messages incorporated into literature for young readers, and how the portrayal of fictional age has been argued to interact with readers' views of age.

### 1.3.1 **Unique in content and construction**

Compared to other kinds of literature, books written for children distinguish themselves as a topic for the study of the social construction of age, due to the unique aspects of their content and production. In terms of content, children's literature is one of the earliest sources of fictional representations of people of various ages that young readers are confronted with. A child may not have grandparents or older teenage siblings in their direct environment, but may encounter them in the stories they read and the stories that are read to them. In that sense, children's literature represents one of the earliest contributions to what Cheryl Laz has referred to as our "tool kit" of age: "[o]ur culture provides us with multiple images of and resources for doing age. These images and resources shape our consciousness of age, our expectations about the life course and life course changes, our behaviour and feelings about our experiences, and our life chances" (102).

There are multiple ways in which age discourse is implicitly and explicitly incorporated in (children's) literature. Direct characterization of figures of various ages by the narrator or via other characters is perhaps the most obvious example. Many children's books also contain a wealth of "metareflections," in which characters or narrators explicitly reflect on age (e.g. "Grownups don't jump around. Ugh, that is not real"; "She was falling in love, because that is what grown-ups do") (Biegel qtd. in Joosen, *Adulthood* 62-63). Furthermore, while these kinds of reflections on age may also appear in other kinds of fiction, they are more prevalent in children's literature because – by and large – "[g]rowing up is the central theme of children's literature" (Nikolajeva, *Power* 50). Thus, not only will characters often reflect on their age and the age of others – questions and comments about age are built into the narratives themselves. One analysis compared Guus Kuijer's children's books with his work for adults, and found that Kuijer included 50% more metareflections per 10.000 words in his children's books (Haverals and Joosen 28).

Children's literature also stands out with regard to the range of age groups it portrays. First of all, it tends to emphasize child characters, and often puts those characters in an intergenerational context, i.e. surrounded by older or younger siblings, parents, teachers, professional adults and grandparents of a wide range of ages. Some scholars have argued that this focus on child characters is virtually unique to children's literature. Peter Hollindale, for instance, writes that most fiction is "made up almost exclusively of adults. What we see is [...] the defictionalization of childhood. Except in the children's book, most fictions [...] omit the child" (21). Others have been more careful in proclaiming the absence of children in adult fiction. Perry Nodelman offers several examples of literature written for adults that features child characters, such as "James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, and

William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*" (Nodelman 195; see also Gavin). However, Nodelman also identifies a different approach to child characters whenever fiction for adults includes them. One crucial difference he highlights, is that with those stories "readers are almost always being invited to see through and beyond what the focalized children in them see" (195-196).

In terms of how it is produced and acquired, children's literature is set apart by being the only kind of literature with a built-in age disparity between producers and (part of the) target audience, as children are not the ones writing, editing, publishing and reviewing these texts. Scholars have noted that the "central tension in the creation and study of children's literature" is:

> the relationship between the adult (primarily writers and critics, but also all the other adults who play a role in promoting, distributing, praising and berating children's books), and the child reader (Pope and Round 258).

From a purely financial perspective, there is arguably a bigger incentive to write a children's book that adult publishers and parents will love and buy for their children, compared to one loved only by children, as they are not the ones spending money. Nodelman goes as far as remarking that "the actual audience for texts of children's literature is not children but [adults]" (207). Especially for the youngest readers, parents or guardians will be almost fully in charge of looking for and buying books, and will select ones they approve of. Note for instance how – by and large, when children's books have been controversial, that controversy has been predominantly driven (and sometimes countered) by adults – the more so with younger target audiences (White 8). Among some adults, there has long been a sentiment that "elementary- school children are too immature for self-selection; hence, adults must choose children's reading materials" (White 8).

So what does this have to with questions of age? First of all, the way in which age is represented in these books is often not necessarily a question of achieving realism or striving for verisimilitude, but of portraying characters in a way in which adults "feel" like they are suitable for a young audience, often in the sense of being good role models. Some books have even been banned for what were considered problematic depictions of age. Alyssa Niccolini points out that the banning is often entangled with "how youth are culturally constructed and the effects these constructions have on the texts deemed age appropriate for them" (23). She lists "untimely teens" as an example of depictions of age that some have found banworthy, i.e. adolescent characters who "defy cultural expectations (or wishes) for the slow and steady unfurling of adolescence" (23). Of course priorities will be different depending on the specific age group a children's book is targeted

at. An adolescent getting involved with underage sex and drug-use, is more likely to be accepted in YA-fiction than in a book for readers younger than 10.

Put differently, the way characters of various ages are represented in fiction for young readers is mediated by what adults believe the young audience they are writing for knows, needs, or needs to know. Furthermore, that perspective relies on the social construction of childhood, which is historically and culturally malleable. An important notion here is the "implied audience" of children's literature. "The implied reader" is not a concept unique to the study of children's literature – stemming from reader-response research. It is "a function not of 'an empirical outside reality' but of the text itself" (Habib 730); the kind of reader the text seems to be designed for, which can but does not need to align with the actual human beings that read the text. What kinds of topics does this reader seem to be interested in? What background knowledge does the text assume its readers have? How developed is their expected vocabulary? What characters are they inclined to identify with?

As such, the implied child reader of children's literature can be said to be a form of generalized child-image that the adult-dominated publishing and buying process both desires and constantly recreates in response to shifting socio-cultural and economic dynamics. A lot of work has been done to describe the kind of implied reader that operates in modern Western children's literature. Michael Benton remarks how "uncovering their implied audience [reveals] something of the singularity of a specifically children's literature" (89). In no particular order, children's literature's implied readers: "tend to be beings without any apparent interest in or awareness of their own sexuality or that of others around them" (Nodelman 200). They are also "developing" (Hunt, *Criticism* 74), or "addressed as the future adult [they are] expected to become" (Beauvais, *Time* 2). The way in which characters of all ages are represented is also affected by how adult authors think of child readers. For instance, Nikolajeva has argued that "mental representation is uncommon in children's literature" because the interpretation of characters' thoughts relies on "certain life experiences" which children – the implied audience – are assumed to lack ("Beyond" 10). Others use these kinds of arguments to support a categorization of a text as children's or adult literature in the first place. Zunshine remarks how there is an expectation that the "implied readers" of children's literature are able to "embed complex mental states […] but not at the same high rate that we've come to expect from a work of 'grown-up' literature" (13).

One concrete example of how these dynamics work is through the rewritings and retranslations of fairy tales. For the second edition of the brothers Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, which was more aimed at child readers than the first, Wilhem Grimm deleted Rapunzel's pregnancy so that her twins simply appear at the end. Joosen remarks

how this shows that "Wilhelm Grimm was willing to give up a coherent plot […] in favour of a view of adulthood that fitted his view of appropriate children's literature, one in which children had a place, but not their conception" (*Adulthood* 76). With various other fairy tales, several versions were published over several centuries that were adapted for the children of those times, or as Michael Benton puts it: "prevailing notions of childhood helped determine the changing character of these texts over several centuries from Perrault's version to those of the present day" (Benton 98).

Thus, children's literature represents a particularly vibrant mix of age-discourses. Content wise it contains an unusual variety of characters of different ages, while emphasizing topics of growing up and dealing with age. This operates on top of a more abstract level of adults creating a cultural artifact that is ostensibly produced for children, but requires a whole chain of adult approval, consequently being built on adult beliefs, expectations and desires for what child readers should know or the topics they enjoy reading about. What that means in practice is contingent on the at-the-time prevailing view on childhood (and adulthood) which is socially, culturally and historically situated. Children's literature will also often include messages for adult (co)readers, which I will reflect on later. Due to these unique aspects, children's literature presents researchers interested in age with several fascinating questions: how is age constructed in these stories? What are adults like in literature written for a young audience? Do readers find fictional representations of their age group credible?

## 1.3.2 Children's literature's treatment of age: the potential significance for readers

A sceptical reader may ask why it matters how age is presented in these books. One reason is the broader "need to understand how representations of ageing circulate in culture and society and the role they play in the shaping of social attitudes and age identities" (Hubble and Tew 4). Put differently, not only do fictional representations of various age groups reveal information about how society constructs age, we also need to increase our insight into the reception of these narratives because they impact how we perceive others and ourselves, i.e. fiction feeds into reality. Hacking calls certain social constructs "interactive," because they interact "with things of that kind, namely people […] who can become aware of how they are classified and modify their behavior accordingly" (32). These interactions can be complex. In the most direct sense, reading about your own age group may change how you think about yourself. Through reading about fictional children/childhood – "child readers of children's literature might be said to be learning to perform childhood, somewhat as Judith Butler suggests people generally learn to perform gender" (Nodelman 193; see also Hunt, *Criticism* 60). Portrayals in fiction thus feed into real world practices, but also the other way around. When fictional children are portrayed as being "in need of

constant protection and surveillance," then real children may in turn be "kept safely at home," thus leading to them "becom[ing] literally incapable of navigating the outside world on their own" (Overall 89). This attitude may then bleed back into how fictional children are portrayed, reinforcing this process.

At the same time, the realization that others perceive you in a potentially negative light may breed resentment that affects how you treat others, inadvertently reaffirming negative stereotypes about your own age group. Golub et al. for instance suggest that because "age-related stereotypes" are so prevalent in all types of media they "are often internalized by the elderly and may affect their ability and willingness to engage with younger people" (277).

This type of discourse is amplified when the focus is on children's literature and its target audience. Children's literature's relationship with its readers has often been constructed as a fundamentally didactic one, even when a particular book does not include an obviously identifiable "lesson." Scholars have argued that "[f]or centuries, children's literature has maintained the purpose of educating and entertaining young people" (Robichaud et al. 6). While contemporary children's literature has mostly moved away from strict moral lessons, it is now instead "characterised by a didactic discourse receptive of a more fluid approach to ethical judgements. Its didactic discourse is thus more prone to trigger conversation than to dictate behaviour" (Beauvais, *Time* 109; see also Hunt, *Criticism* 28; Nikolajeva, *Power* 43; Nikolajeva, *Approaches* 2; Wilkie-Stibbs 356). One key factor in these discussions is the idea that children are not only "more deeply influenced by literature than adults" (Niccolini 24), they are also *in need* of that influence. Children's literature is therefore arguably a piece of the broader construct of childhood as a time when fundamental assumptions about "right or wrong" are formed, and "when one is taught to see as 'normal' or 'natural' aspects of existence which should in fact be questioned" (Beauvais, *Time* 105). In short, children's literature, more so than other kinds of fiction, is explicitly perceived as conveying knowledge, values and emotions to its intended readers, who are themselves seen as more susceptible to that information (Goldstein and Russ 106; see also Appleyard 59; Nodelman 157).

One aspect of that didactic message is information about age and age groups, and the normative ideas we attach to various periods in life (Gullette 148). This can be explicit (e.g. the aforementioned metareflections) but is also present in other aspects of characterization, such as a character's spoken dialogue. Children's literature scholars have both criticized and commended various representations of age in books written for children, emphasizing the problematic or positive connotations young readers may gather from encountering them (Nodelman 65; Van Lierop-Debrauwer 76; Apseloff 80; Santaulària i Capdevila 60; Joosen, *Adulthood* 104-110). This includes constructions of

childhood, adulthood, old age, more specific age groups and broader intergenerational assumptions. That being said, more criticism has been levelled at constructions of childhood than at old age and middle adulthood, with middle adulthood receiving the least attention of all (Joosen, *Adulthood* 5). This arguably continues the same tendency of adulthood being left unquestioned due to its central, perceived-as-self-evident position.

Within the scope of this chapter, I can only offer a handful of examples of analyses that explore constructions of age in children's literature. Hopefully, this short overview will nevertheless give an idea of the diversity of approaches and findings. Robichaud et al. explore how children's rights are portrayed in children's literature. They insist that it "is essential to critically examine how children and childhoods are conveyed and positioned in storybooks and to question how these messages may be absorbed and internalized by children" (8), and point to some children's books that do – and some that do not – present child readers with healthy intergenerational dynamics that affirm children's rights. There are also analyses that focus on the potentially negative messages aimed at child readers, criticizing stories for offering a "one-sided view of childhood as imprisoning, maturity as empowering" (Nodelman 65). Helma Van Lierop-Debrauwer starts her analysis of the portrayal of old age and euthanasia in two Dutch children's books by establishing that "learning about the meaning of age and ageing is an important part of children's socialization process" (76), before referring to the portrayal of old people in children's literature as "ambiguous" (76). She asserts that aside from stereotypical portrayals of "physical unattractiveness and passiveness" (76), there are also "positive images of them in numerous […] children's books. There, understanding and friendly grandparents tell their grandchildren stories and guide them through life, often siding with children on issues that their parents feel differently about" (77; also see Apseloff 80). Other scholars point out how books "produced for and consumed by children, teenagers and young adults [do] not usually feature older heroes/heroines, even though old men and women do play key roles as advisors, helpers or evil opponents" (Santaulària i Capdevila 60). Joosen explores constructions of adulthood as a broader category, pointing out how some children's books equate hairiness with the adult body, which is then often ridiculed or even treated with disgust (*Adulthood* 104-110). She also identifies a "seesaw effect" in several children's books: "narratives that attribute great agency and worth to children and older characters, frequently cast a dismissive picture of the generations in between" (*Adulthood* 189), thus celebrating grandparental and other older figures, at the cost of casting middle adulthood as "a phase that is to be despised" (*Adulthood* 190).

While more emphasis has been placed on what the portrayal of various age groups might mean for children's literature's intended child audience, adults also read books for younger audiences. Alison Waller has explored the intricacies of adult readers revisiting childhood

books. This can occur in an individual setting, perhaps born from curiosity or nostalgia, but Waller also remarks that there are "'generational texts' in the sense of objects passed from teacher to pupil, parent to child, and sometimes from grandparent to grandchild" (136). These generational texts tend to be experienced in an intergenerational dynamic, with adults reading with or to children. Waller cites Barbara Wall's notion of "double address" as being significant for a text to become "generational." A text has a "double addressee" when some part of it is "aimed separately towards adult and child readers" (Waller 138). Joosen has remarked that this quality of double address creates a secondary didactic effect for the adult, with some "potential lessons" being "specifically targeted towards the adult reader" (*Adulthood* 29), such as role models of successful parenthood. The potential impact these didactic effects have on adults should not be underestimated. Neugarten et al. remark that one's perspective on adulthood is not set in stone once we are adults, instead pointing to *continued and constant* adulthood socialization. They argue that: "as the individual ages he becomes increasingly aware of age discriminations in adult behavior and of the system of social sanctions that operate with regard to age appropriateness" (716). Joosen notes that while didactic messages aimed at adults are mostly found in "books for pre-school readers because those are still read aloud and thus require a higher level of adult involvement," they do not fully disappear from books for older child readers either (*Adulthood* 31). In addition, adult readers may very well enjoy children's literature on their own, without a child reader present. For those adult readers, reading children's books may offer an opportunity for personal reflections, reminding them "of how they interpreted and performed adulthood as children" and, "hold[ing] a mirror to them in which they may or may not recognize aspects of their adult selves" (*Adulthood* 5).

So, to weave all of these threads together – children's literature not only presents young readers with an unusually broad age-range of characters, it also has a long history of scholars pointing out both problematic and positive aspects of the portrayal of the ages of those characters. In addition, the ways in which age is represented in these books is mediated by what adults believe is suitable for an audience of a particular age, thus adding an additional level through which negotiations of age take place. Finally, while fictional portrayals of age from all sources may contribute to the way we construct our own age, the level to which children's literature is uniquely recognized as didactic, while being predominantly aimed at an audience constructed as being especially susceptible and in need of that didacticism is also striking. Furthermore, beyond that core audience many children's books also contain secondary didactic messages aimed at adult co-readers, about being a "good" adult, parent, grandparent, teacher, and so on. That being said, establishing that children's literature is didactic and presents its readers (of all ages) with lessons about age does not inherently mean that this messaging is uncritically absorbed or even noticed in the first place. In that sense, simply stating what the story presents to a

hypothetical reader says little about how actual readers engage with such a presentation of age. For as complicated and nuanced as the implied readership of children's literature can be, it is still a construct. There are plenty of child readers, for instance, "who do not fit comfortably within the group targeted as 'located within symbolic childhood'" (Beauvais, *Time* 9). If we desire to inquire into the effect of the sum total of all these discourses on age on actual readers, we enter the realm of reader-response studies, the third discipline in which this dissertation is grounded, and which I will discuss in the final section of this theoretical framework.

## 1.4 Reader-response studies: the reader as meaning-maker

From age studies, I adopt the perspective that age is a social construct, and that there is a real need to further our insights into how cultural products reflect and contribute to this process of social construction. From children's literature studies, I adopt an awareness of how age is imbedded within all aspects of children's literature's production and reception. The question then becomes what kind of research can help us to capitalize on the questions that emerge at the intersection of those first two academic frameworks. One potential answer here is to turn to reader-response research. In this section, I will therefore highlight how reader-response research can complement and build on the framework that I have outlined above. I begin by exploring what reader-response research is, how it came into being, and what it can achieve. After this more general introduction, I explore a first key area from which I take inspiration: the fact that the age of readers has been a point of interest from reader-response research's earliest days. Then, I briefly highlight some of the ways in which reader-response research has been used in the past to conduct research into children's literature. This third exploration of the disciplines that inform my work is followed by a final summary in which I pull all these threads together to highlight how my own research fills in the gap that emerges at the meeting point of these three disciplines.

As the name suggests, reader-response criticism directs academic interest towards literature's reader. Its modern incarnation arose in the theory boom of the 70s and 80s, when it defined itself through its inclusive nature compared to the other dominant theories of that time (Harkin 416). I use the term "inclusive" here in light of how other paradigms had considerably reduced *whose* analyses of literature were perceived as valid and why. More specifically, reader-response criticism's emergence is often contextualized as "a reaction against Anglo-American 'new criticism' of the post-war period" (Bennett and Royle 11). It is therefore interesting to briefly consider the question: what was reader-response research reacting against and why?

### 1.4.1 The origins and intent of reader-response research

The "Anglo-American 'new criticism'" mentioned by Bennet and Royle exemplified the spirit of a time when most literary research took the position that "each work has *a* [emphasis in original] meaning" and that the critic and *only* the critic is the one "to discover that meaning" (Culler 52). This approach to the study of literature was motivated by a drive for objectivity which systematically discredited the relevance of the reader's reaction. In fact, paying attention to what a piece of writing does to the reader was notoriously dubbed the "affective fallacy" by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley in 1949. They argued that "[t]here is no legitimate reason why criticism [...] should become a dependent of social history or of anthropology" (54). Instead, they sought stable and definite meaning, which they believed could only be found in the text itself. The academic critic's role was then to extract that meaning from that text and teach it to others: "[t]he critic is [...] a teacher or explicator of meanings [and] will speak of emotions which are not only complex and dependent upon a precise object but also, and for these reasons, stable" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 48). Furthermore, even before this exclusion of the reader, Wimsatt and Beardsley's quest for stable meaning had led them – through an essay titled "The Intentional Fallacy" – to also cut authors from the group of individuals who could offer legitimate insight into a text. The result was essentially the reduction of valid perspectives to those offered by a comparatively small group of academics who were up to date on the then dominant literary theories.

The New Critics' pursuit of stable meaning was often couched in an expressed concern for "objective" research. Jonathan Culler remarks that there is a core argument here about the validity of the types of knowledge that literary research aims to produce. The New Critics discounted readers' reflections on the literature they read because they saw them as capricious and believed their interpretations to "vary in unpredictable ways," thus not being "reliable" (Culler 53). In the very first paragraph of "The Affective Fallacy," readers' responses to literature were described as one of "the acknowledged and usually feared obstacles to objective criticism" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 31). It is partially in response to this constrained view on valid criticism that reader-response research emerged as a more inclusive, open paradigm of academic literary research, grounded in a particular implicit core question: "[i]nstead of taking the proliferation of interpretations as an obstacle to knowledge, can one attempt to make it an object of knowledge, asking how it is that literary works have the meaning they do for readers?" (Culler 52).

By advocating for a shift of academic focus towards readers, reader-response criticism received some pushback in its early days. Michael Benton writes how it gave "the reader freedoms that infuriate text-oriented critics" (87). Patricia Harkin relates some of this

negative feedback to an elitist desire at play among some academics who wished to limit the validity of non-academic perspectives on literature. Harkin writes how:

> Theories survive in a competitive academic marketplace in part as a consequence of the degree of difficulty ascribed to them, the extent to which they give their adherents the sense of power that comes from understanding a discourse other people don't understand. (Harkin 415)

Reader-response criticism clashed with this notion, because, while New Criticism and other prominent paradigms such as "deconstruction, new historicism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Jamesonian Marxism, Foucauldian genealogies" and so on (Harkin 413-414), shifted meaning-making power away from authors, "only reader-response gave that power to any old reader" (Harkin 416). Accordingly, in early reader-response criticism, we find explicit and implicit replies to all sorts of negative feedback that was levelled at the discipline as a whole. In the early 1980s, Louise Rosenblatt reflected how just a little while before, "simply to talk about the reader's response was considered practically subversive" ("Transaction" 268). Stanley Fish, writing around the same time, commented that for him to shift focus to readers: "it was necessary to remove the chief objection to talking about the experience of the reader, to wit, that there are (at least potentially) as many experiences as there are readers, and that therefore the decision to focus on the reader is tantamount to giving up the possibility of saying anything that would be of general interest" (4).

However, it is worth noting that while it is true that the particular theories and practices we now refer to as "reader-response criticism" emerged in part as a reaction to New Criticism and adjacent approaches, those same text-centred approaches – in their own way – had themselves begun to stress the need for objectivity precisely as a reaction to older traditions that had put more emphasis on readers and how they experience literature. Rafey Habib writes how reader-response criticism – rather than being a truly "new" shift in the way literature was studied, can also be said to be a "renewal of a long and diversified tradition that had acknowledged the important role of the reader or audience in the overall structure of any given literary or rhetorical situation" (709). Various older movements such as the Romantics, symbolism and impressionism had "stressed the reader's subjective response to literature and art" (Habib 708).

### 1.4.2 Constructed readers or actual readers?

At its core, reader-response criticism asks "how it is that literary works have the meaning they do for readers," and consequently attempts to gain insight into the "proliferation of interpretations" (Culler 52) which the formalists of the 1950s and 60s had dismissed for its unreliability. As Fish remarked, this shift towards the reader meant redefining "meaning […] as an event rather than an entity" (Fish 3). In other words, not as an objective, singularly particular thing bound inexorably to a text, but as an interactive process, which

"displaces the notion of an autonomous text to be examined in and on its own terms […] and substitutes the reader's recreation of that text" (Benton 88).

Specific attempts at gaining these insights can be diverse in their choice of a particular approach, their emphases on theoretical frameworks, their exact methods for collecting empirical data and so on. In Michael Benton's overview of reader-response criticism, he humorously refers to the reader's response as "the Loch Ness Monster of literary studies" because "the most sensitive probing with the most sophisticated instruments has so far succeeded only in producing pictures of dubious authenticity" (86). The hunters of this monster, as Benton adds, are nevertheless "many and their approaches [are] various" (86). The variety in approaches Benton identifies mostly stem from just how complex a reader's response to literature can be. Hunt posits that:

> Literary meanings are often emotive or impressionistic, connotative as well as denotative; and so who the readers are, where they are, when and why they read, how much they know, how much they have read, how much they want to read, their capacity for understanding – all these and other factors besides contribute to the meaning. (*Criticism* 66)

This complexity has engendered a wide range of approaches and angles with which researchers have aimed to increase our understanding of "the" reader's response. Benton identifies three main tendencies. There are those who "attend to the covert activity of the reading process, deducing the elements of response from what readers say or write" (86), there are those who focus on "developing theoretical models of aesthetic experience" (86), and there are some researchers who mix both approaches.

Several of these "theoretical models of aesthetic experience" (86) are tied to well-known names of reader-response criticism, such as Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish. Rosenblatt wrote about the reading experience as a "transaction," and coined the concept of the "efferent" and "aesthetic" reading stance ("Transaction" 268-269). These stances were ways to reflect on a reader's "expression of purpose" ("Transaction" 275), or put differently, what readers wanted to get out of the text. An efferent stance means we read "in order to arrive at some desired result, some answer to a question," while an aesthetic stance "has an intrinsic purpose, the desire to have a pleasurable, interesting experience for its own sake" ("Transaction" 275). In that regard, Rosenblatt's work focused more on the individual reader. There are also reader-response critics who zoom out and discuss broader dynamics among groups of readers. The prime example here is Fish and his "interpretive community" (14). Fish envisions the reader not as "a free agent, making literature in any old way, but as a member of a community whose assumptions about literature determine the kind of attention he pays and thus the kind of literature 'he' 'makes'" (Fish 14). In other words, instead of an individual conducting a "transaction" with a piece of writing, Fish conceives of the self "not as an independent entity but as a social

construct whose operations are delimited by the systems of intelligibility that inform it. […] [T]he meanings it confers on texts are not its own but have their source in the interpretive community (or communities) of which it is a function" (335).

Both Rosenblatt and Fish are still regularly cited in research that deals with readers (a.o. Pope and Round 265; Tandoi, "Negotiating" 80; Waller 29). However, in developing their "theoretical models of aesthetic experience" (Benton 86), the readers they envision are sometimes more hypothetical than actual. Fish, for instance, admits that the reader he writes about does not actually exist: "Obviously, my reader is a construct, an ideal or idealized reader" (48). His insights into this constructed reader are then supplemented with an anecdotal approach to empirical data through comments like "I am thinking, for example, of something that happened in my classroom just the other day" (332). Some have criticized this use of hypothetical readers. For instance, Maureen and Hugh Crago comment on scholars who make sweeping claims about readers' responses without doing any empirical research, pointing out "the astonishing willingness of some analytic scholars to generalize about the functions served by fiction on the basis of slender or even nonexistent evidence of actual reader-responses" (xxix). Similarly, Hunt comments that "one of [his] own objections to much reader-response theory […] is that it posits a cretinous reader who has to lumber along each line of text, constantly surprised by the next lexical or grammatical development (*Criticism* 94).

The alternative is conducting empirical reader-response research with actual readers, and thus "attend[ing] to the covert activity of the reading process, deducing the elements of response from what readers say or write" (Benton 86). As John Stephens points out: "Some things about readers' minds which a literary scholar might maintain as a theory or hunch may now be demonstrable through empirical research" (vi). Sometimes the goal of such research can be to empirically test particular "aesthetic experience" models, but often scholars emphasise more specific hypotheses (Fjällström and Kokkola 407; Hippisley 224; Tandoi, "Negotiating" 79). One common strategy in the latter case, is to isolate a particular variable and explore how it impacts the reading experience. In the case of Stening and Stening, they wished to know how "culture" contributes to the perception of characters (292), while Goldstein and Russ hypothesised that children "who demonstrated better fantasy skills should be better able to understand the fantasy lesson in the story" (108). In that endeavour, age becomes of particular interest, as I will explore in the next section.

### 1.4.3 The age of the actual reader

The age of the reader has been a point of interest for reader-response critics from the start. Back in 1960, Rosenblatt argued that "the *Antony and Cleopatra* read at fifteen is not

the same work we evoke at thirty" ("Reader" 305; see also "Transaction" 270-271). Moreover, when age is invoked in more recent reader-response research, the social construction of age tends be incorporated into the argument with some recognition of the fact that "[a]ge's measurability does not carry with it universality of meaning" (Looser 28). To offer an example, Waller remarks that "[a]s a reader ages, his or her life is populated by a wide range of reading matter, as well as literary and non-literary events that inflect reading response" (25). The "meaning" of a reader's age for their response to literature is thus not the direct equivalent of their chronological age, but rather the amalgam of their particular experiences, events, beliefs,…. As Anna Sparrman writes: "the same numerical age can have different values depending on when, where, by whom and to what it is related" (244).

Various children's literature critics have in fact made roughly that same point. Hunt has stated that children and adults

> cannot make the same meanings for reasons of:
>
> - Counter – or anti-culture
> - Psychology
> - Life experience (denotation)
> - Text experience (genre)
> - The whole structure of allusions being different. (*Criticism* 97)

Hunt's list is not only true in the broader context of adult readers versus child readers, but also holds up between adult readers of different ages. For example, a reader in her late 70s will have experienced different (counter)cultural movements in her youth compared to a reader in their 30s, for instance. The idea that such experiences affect how we reflect on age in the books we read, is further supported by personal reflections of critics on how their reading experiences changed as they aged. Gullette read Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* multiple times in the course of her life, but only in old age did she "finally notice the key to Proust's underlying values and structure: the figure of the grandmother" (167). After all: "[r]elevant cultural discourses influence what readers can notice at *any* given age (Gullette 168; emphasis mine). Gullette's insight into Proust did not arrive as soon as she turned 18, but rather "some decades" later (167). Other readers may disagree with that interpretation, and this might be influenced by their age. The point is that although a particular reader's age can indeed be a strong determining factor in their experience of literature, it can be difficult to transform that observation into generalizable claims, as the experience of age is often a distinctly individual one, and is also entangled with other elements of readers' positionality, which I will explore further in my methodological section.

### 1.4.4 Empirical reader-response research and children's literature

Despite children's literature's fascinating position in terms of age discourse, surprisingly little empirical research has been done that explores *actual* readers' (of all ages) reactions to age in children's literature. In fact, this is a broader gap in the scholarship that has been pointed out for decades. Twenty years ago, Amy Goldstein and Sandra Russ remarked how, "there has been little empirical work" (106) that focuses on the effect of reading on children's behaviour. A few years later Michael Benton pointed out that when empirical research on children's literature is conducted, these tend to be "small-scale enquiries," with a narrow focus regarding "the number, age-level, social background, gender and literacy level of the readers" (90). In 2015, Fjällström and Kokkola once again affirmed how "very few conduct empirical research with young readers" (395). In the same year, James Pope and Julia Round wrote that "children's responses to children's literature—already massively overlooked in comparison to the perceptions of adult reviewers and critics—need to be further explored" (271).

Although this kind of research remains rare, the last couple of decades have nevertheless seen a fair share of researchers turn to empirical methods to explore various aspects of (young) readers' responses to children's literature. The diverse approaches we can find in these projects mirror the complexity of how the experience of literature is shaped by socio-cultural factors. Consequently, a broad range of individual, collective and cultural traits and qualities have been explored, from a variety of angles. To close this section, I outline a handful of recent reader-response research projects involving children's literature and/or child readers. These particular studies have been selected with the intent of offering a short overview of the variety of approaches and difference in scope that can be found in this sort of research.

Among children's literature scholars, the work of Maureen and Hugh Crago is known for its extensive focus on one actual reader, their young daughter Anna, whose early engagement with picturebooks was described in *Prelude to Literacy: A Preschool Child's Encounter with Picture and Story* (1983). The Cragos (though mostly Maureen), collected "some 1000 manuscript pages of notes, covering four years of Anna's life and over 400 individual book titles" (xviii). These notes consisted of a mix of their personal recollections of unrecorded moments in which their daughter engaged with books and storytelling, and transcripts from moments that were recorded (xxi). Using these notes, the Cragos develop a range of observations on – among other topics – Anna's own storytelling practices in response to books (140), her "perception of style" (177) and her "perception of humor" (185).

Amy B. Goldstein and Sandra W. Russ (2000) have used reader-response research to explore whether differing levels of cognitive development, specifically the use of fantasy,

affect young readers' responses to Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. They observed 55 children between the ages of six and eight during their playtime, conducted a four-question interview, read the story and asked each child to engage in a number of tasks (109). Goldstein and Russ's research did not find a link "between fantasy ability and fantasy understanding" and hypothesised that "the present study may have attempted to measure a construct irrelevant for children this age" (121).

James Pope and Julia Round (2015) conducted reader-response research in school. Their aim was to contrast young readers' responses to Roald Dahl's *Matilda* with adult academic discourse, specifically focussing on the question of whether Matilda can be considered a hero. To gather data, they worked with 150 students between the ages of seven and eleven, spread out over seven classes (262). Pope and Round spent one hour in each class. After a discussion with the whole class on the topic of heroes and watching some scenes from a movie adaptation of *Matilda*, pupils were given a "a very simple type of questionnaire" to complete (364). Pope and Round found that the child readers had complex views on heroism, including the idea that Matilda can be a hero "despite not always doing 'the right thing'" (270).

Waller's (2019) aforementioned research project took place between 2009 and 2014, and "approximately 120 adults between the ages of eighteen and eighty" participated (199). Waller was particularly interested in these adult readers' memories of their childhood books. Thus, participants were asked to complete an initial questionnaire "about their childhood reading habits and histories, detailing specific books they read as children" (199). Afterwards, roughly one third of these participants continued with a second phase of the project in which they reread a book from their childhood and participated in an interview, or offered written notes. Waller found that, among various other aspects, "involuntary memory, conscious attempts at recollections, […] textual recognition […] the incorporations of books into real or virtual environments; feelings reignited through glimpses of character or atmosphere" (190) all tie into readers' experiences of fiction and their engagement with books from their childhood.

Eve Tandoi (2019) incorporated reader-response research in the schoolwork of a class of 23 children between ten and eleven years old. She organized several semi-structured (group) discussions and asked participants to reflect on their reading through writing journals. The writing journals "provided spaces within which the children could raise their own questions and explore subjects that might not have been covered during the semi-structured discussions" ("Negotiating" 80). The broader aim was to increase insight into the development of "literary competence" ("Negotiating" 79). Tandoi's results stress the importance of the embodied aspect of children's responses to literature. The young readers shaped group discussions about the book by performing parts of it in various ways

(e.g. reading sections out loud). Their shaping of these performances added meaning beyond the books' literal text by using "exaggerated prosodic registers to effectively rework adult discourses" ("Negotiating" 87).

Rowena and Bruce Stening (2020) used online surveys to reach an audience of Chinese and Australian Harry Potter fans, to gain more insight into how culture influences the way readers perceive characters such as Severus Snape (292-293). Their survey was spread via schools and fan forums. Respondents were between the ages of eleven and twenty-five, and were predominantly women. In the surveys, participants were asked to rate several characters on the "Big Five" personality trait structure (291). Stening and Stening found "clear evidence of significant differences between the perceptions of English- and Chinese-language respondents" (305), such as the latter's tendency to score all characters higher on three of the five personality dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness and openness (303).

Within this very limited overview, the wide variety of approaches that can be found within reader-response research already becomes apparent. In this small sample alone, scholars make use of surveys (Stening and Stening 292), observations (Goldstein and Russ 109; Crago and Crago xx), writing journals (Tandoi, "Negotiating" 80), group discussions (Pope and Round 364; Tandoi, "Negotiating" 80), individual discussions (Crago and Crago xxiv-xxv; Waller 199) and creative performances of the text (Tandoi, "Negotiating" 82). This broad range of approaches characterizes the field as a whole. One could argue that making "the proliferation of interpretations [...] an object of knowledge" (Culler 52), necessitated a simultaneous proliferation of research methodologies. These disparate approaches each in their own way attempt to capture a distinct part of the reader's response. A group discussion on literature can capture aspects of Fish's "interpretive community" (14), performances of a text reveal how readers create a "multi-sensory reading experience" (Tandoi, "Negotiating" 81), surveys can lead to broader comparisons across wider groups of readers, and so on.

This leads me to one of the key takeaways from this field for my own research project: reader-response research's open, vibrant and diverse approach to exploring reader's responses. Pulling reader-response research into the broader conversation about age and children's literature consequently opens up a realm of potential methodologies for gathering and discussing readers' perspectives on their own age and the age of characters in children's literature. Accordingly, at several points in the execution of this research project, I looked back to what others had done in the field of reader-response research and adapted or combined approaches to explore the particular aspects I wished to emphasize. A second key takeaway from the above discussion is the established importance of the reader's age in conditioning their response, with the significant caveat

that this can often be a highly individual event (Sparrman 244; Hunt, *Criticism* 97). Thus, for my analyses, I take with me an awareness of the complexity of pointing to the reader's age for explaining a particular response to literature. Two readers of the exact same age may respond in wildly different ways. This does not need to mean that age is not the conditioning factor in their response, rather it may indicate that the significance of their age is built on a lifetime of different experiences.

## 1.5 Identifying a gap

In this theoretical framework I have explored research and concepts from three distinct academic disciplines: age studies, children's literature research and reader-response research. From each, I have highlighted concrete concepts, but also broader lines of debate and topics that scholars point to as needing more research. What I aimed to do throughout this framework, was create a broader conversation in which it becomes evident how all these fields talk to each other in a way that is not only complementary, but also reveals a gap in the research that is as of yet unexplored. To summarize this in a single paragraph: age scholars take a social-constructivist perspective on age, which posits that our view on age is determined by social and cultural factors. Using that angle, different cultural narratives have been explored in terms of how they shape our view on age, often focusing on intergenerational conflict or ageism. Recent examples of – at best – a lack of intergenerational understanding, and – at worst – direct antagonism, have further underscored the importance of increasing our insight into how cultural narratives are received and processed. Here, children's literature criticism presents the researcher with an intriguing object of study. Decades of children's literature scholarship has highlighted the myriad ways in which age is part of children's literature's construction, reception, distribution, characters, themes and more. What it has not explored as much, however, is empirical reader-response data, which is often identified as one of the rarer kinds of research as far as children's literature scholarship is concerned. Meanwhile, reader-response researchers have – for almost as long as the modern incarnation of the discipline exists – remarked on the significance of the reader's age for their experience of literature. Thus, looking at this state of affairs, we can argue that what has been lacking is an empirical reader-response project that capitalizes on the intricate age discourse entrenched in children's literature to explore how readers of a variety of ages position themselves in wide array of socio-cultural discourses to give meaning to their own age and the age of characters. Filling this gap is the broad intent of my thesis, and I approach this through the core research question: **How does the age of the real reader affect the understanding of age in fiction for young readers?**

# **Data and Methods**

This chapter explores how I developed my core research question into a qualitative empirical research project. There are three core components to this discussion: 1) participants – their recruitment and details; 2) data collection – why I chose the specific children's books I ended up working with, the development of the interview guides and the transcription process; and 3) data analysis – how I used NVivo to navigate the qualitative data. These three components form the core structure of this chapter, and will be discussed in that order. First, however, I want to address the broadest distinguishing feature of my work: the fact that this is qualitative empirical research. The choice to conduct my project from a qualitative angle determined how the three aforementioned components were shaped. Thus, I want to start by reflecting on the impact this choice had on my project's validity and reliability, and my positionality as a researcher.

## 2.1 **Quantitative or qualitative research**

Across the sciences, "a distinction is commonly drawn between quantitative and qualitative research" (Strauss 2; see also Seidman 8). Quantitative research tends to be built on mathematics and statistics, and is used in fields like economics, digital humanities and sociology, among others. Qualitative research – which is how empirical reader-response research tends to be classified – "marshals an emphasis on meaning: it focuses attention on the perspectives and interpretations that people develop about experiences and events" (Hermanowicz 491). To gather these perspectives, qualitative researchers utilize approaches such as interviews, focus group discussions and observations, among others (Darlington and Scott 48; 74; 99).[6]

One point of criticism that is sometimes leveled at quantitative research is that there is an intangible human element that cannot be captured in, or represented by, numbers (Seidman 9). Hilaire Belloc famously quipped that "[s]tatistics are the triumph of the quantitative method, and the quantitative method is the victory of sterility and death" (Qtd. In Gould 77). In arguments that defend or even evangelize qualitative research, its proponents often stress the kinds of knowledge that qualitative research excels at gathering: "Qualitative approaches […] can account for emotions, as well as for other less tangible aspects" (Spencer et al. 93). Crago and Crago, for instance, remarked that they did

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[6] I want to emphasize that a focus on age and literature does not demand the use of qualitative methods. For example, other scholars approach these topics from a quantitative angle, such as Lindsey Geybels' enquiries into the influence of the age of the intended reader on the writing style of authors of fiction for younger as well as adult readers by using stylometric methods (see Haverals et al. 2022) or on general trends in the characterisation of older people in those same books using syntactic parsing (see Geybels forthcoming).

"not intend a rigorous work by the standards of quantitative research in the social sciences" (xxviii), in part because "a picture book is a stimulus far too complex to be investigated under such conditions" (xxx).

For my purposes, qualitative research was therefore the logical choice, as the wide range of readers' emotions, experiences and thoughts that inform their perspective on age cannot be fully expressed in numbers. Qualitative research allowed me to delve into readers' beliefs about their own age; their childhood memories that support particular readings; their preconceived notions of age and their gaps in knowledge; and even the way they position themselves as a younger or older person vis-à-vis a mid-twenties researcher like myself.

### 2.1.1 The validity and representability of qualitative research

The label of qualitative research covers a wide range of methodologies and philosophies. Brinkmann et al. remark that "the landscape of qualitative research is extremely variegated", in large part due to "the complexities of the subject matter" (40). Accompanying that variety of approaches, there has been an ongoing discussion about the "validity" and "representability" of this kind of research. These discussions often respond to concerns that qualitative research is inherently more political than quantitative research, which in turn is said to present objective facts. Some "call qualitative researchers *journalists* or 'soft' scientists. Their work is termed unscientific, only exploratory, or subjective. [...] [Q]ualitative researchers write fiction, not science, and have no way of verifying their truth statements" (Denzin and Lincoln 40; emphasis in original). In response to such accusations, some qualitative scholars have explicitly adopted quantitative-like research practices, whereas others outright reject them.

One group has promoted strict methodological frameworks within which qualitative research can be conducted with the same objective rigour as quantitative research. R. Burke Johnson, for example, has created a table of "Strategies Used to Promote Qualitive Research Validity" (283). This table includes but is not limited to: extended fieldwork, low inference descriptors, triangulation, participant feedback, peer review, negative case sampling and reflexivity (283). Other scholars similarly stress the importance of striving for validity and reliability, while recognizing that these terms carry different nuances when applied to qualitative research. Along those lines, Cohen et al. write how "in qualitative data, validity might be addressed through the honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data achieved, the participants approached, the extent of triangulation and the disinterestedness or objectivity of the researcher" (105). This is contrasted with practices or concepts such as "controllability" and "randomization of samples" which are seen as fundamental for quantitative validity, but with less use in qualitative research (106).

A different group of researchers sees concepts such as validity and reliability as unnecessary for – and maybe even threats to – conducting qualitative research, even

suggesting that their proponents suffer from "methodological fetishism" or "physics envy" (Brinkmann et al. 38). There are fears among some qualitative scholars that when researchers uncritically adopt "conceptions of validity and reliability from positivism […] [they] will compromise essential aspects of our historical legacy […] and perhaps even the raison d'être of qualitative research" (Brinkmann et al. 38; see also Seidman 8). Valerie Janesick takes this side, proclaiming that with qualitative research, the goal is "to tell a story as it is, without reference to prediction, proof, control, or generalizability. We are researching subjectivity and proud of it" (305). Likewise, Norman Denzin comments that qualitative researchers should not even use the word "data" because it "invokes a positivist epistemology and a politics of evidence based on terms like *reliability* and *validity*" (1458; emphasis in original).

One part of this discussion involves whether or not the qualitative researcher can and should adopt an objective, distanced position vis-à-vis their object of study. Quantitative methodology fundamentally relies on establishing the researcher as an objective, outside observer of reality. Quantitative research becomes valid and reliable because the researcher (ideally) either does not influence the events in any way, or does it in a way that is controllable and reproducible. Those who support a quantitative outlook on qualitative research tend to stress the importance of striving for this objective distance. When Wimsatt and Beardsley questioned the point of studying the reader's response, they remarked that

> The report of some reader, on the other hand, that a poem or story induces in them vivid images, intense feelings, or heightened consciousness, is neither anything which can be refuted nor anything which it is possible for the objective critic to take into account. (Wimsatt and Beardsley 45)

This position has become less prevalent among qualitative scholars. Modern handbooks of qualitative methodologies inform their reader that qualitative "researchers are not considered neutral or objective in the traditional sense" (Leavy 3). This perspective extends to qualitative data gathering. Cohen et al. comment that the more we strive for objectivity, the more the people we study "will be measured as though they are inanimate objects", and the more our research "will become decontextualized" (131). In other words, when qualitative researchers overemphasize objectivity and controllability, the social, cultural, economic, i.e. the *human* context is lost. Others go slightly further and argue that it is not even possible to do objective qualitative research, calling objective observers a "myth" (Denzin 1458). Carolyn Ellis points to the "deficiencies of traditional social-science research" (258), adding that gaining vital insights often means "violating the taken-for-granted conventions of social science research […], breaching the separation of subject and researcher" (Ellis and E. Adams 258). Put simply, the qualitative researcher is less and less seen as an objective, distanced observer of the world, and more as an inherent part of that world. Instead of pursuing quantitative-like objectivity, valid qualitative knowledge can

be produced precisely because the researcher engages with, and is part of what they research (Leavy 3).

Some scholars adopt what is now called a "new materialist" perspective, which posits that "human observers are ineluctably caught up in the actions they attempt to describe and explain." But rather than "bemoaning a failure of objectivity", these scholars propose that we "treat the researcher and the researched event, plus the many other relations involved in social inquiry such as the tools, technologies and theories of scientific research, as relations within a research-assemblage" (Fox and Alldred, *Sociology* 27-28). In such a line of thinking, there is no longer a "self-evident hierarchy between (all-knowing) researcher and (objectivized and repressed) research object"[7] (Van der Tuin 6). This stretches the idea of researcher reflexivity to new lengths, with the researcher's influence on the outcome of qualitative research becoming one of the objects of study.

In conducting qualitative research, I position myself somewhere on the spectrum that I have outlined above. Therefore, I want to explicitly acknowledge the variation that is present across my later analyses in terms of my approach to objectivity and my position as a researcher. In a nutshell, different chapters of this thesis adopt slightly different philosophies of qualitative research. I consider this a feature of my analysis, instead of a shortcoming. Chapters 3.1. and 3.2. align more with classic sociological approaches where I attempt to take a step back as a researcher and offer a perspective on the data from the position of a detached observer. That being said, even though I do not thematize entanglement and subjectivity in those particular sections, I do want to recognize that the data I discuss there nevertheless emerged through an entanglement between what is researched and who does the researching, as readers positioned their own wisdom, innocence and other aspects of their own age in relation to me, or reflected on how my request for them to complete *Mina'*s extraordinary activities led to them remembering childhood memories that they otherwise had lost access to. In contrast, chapter 3.3. explicitly adopts a new materialist viewpoint. There, I conduct my analysis from an angle that emphasizes the entanglement of researcher, methodology, environment and participant. It explores in more detail my own role as a researcher and the co-construction of knowledge that occurred through my presence in the interviews and focus groups. These differing approaches across these sections are not intended as demonstrations of competing perspectives on qualitative research, but rather the result of how – in the course of growing as a qualitative researcher while writing this thesis – I came to terms with the most fitting and engaging ways of responding to particular research questions, research situations, and different kinds of data.

A core part of this discussion also involves my own positionality as a researcher. If the qualitative researcher is no longer deemed objective, then it becomes even more

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[7] Original text: "er is geen vanzelfsprekende hiërarchie meer tussen (alwetende) onderzoeker en (geobjectiveerd en onderdrukt) onderzoeksobject" (Van der Tuin 6)

important to acknowledge how my subjectivity – both in who I am and what I believe – plays a part in the co-creation of knowledge.

## 2.1.2 Positionality

Positionality can be a complex term. Leavy links it strongly to "reflexivity", defining reflexivity as "[a]ttention to power, bias, and researcher positionality", which is about "acknowledging our power, privileges, and biases throughout the research process" (5). Cohen et al. suggest that qualitative interviewers "bring their own, often unconscious experiential and biographical baggage with them into the interview situation" (121). To acknowledge this, some suggest that is good practice when "the researcher actively engages in critical self reflection [sic] about his or her potential biases and predispositions", often in the form of a separate section of the article or larger work in which the biases and predispositions are outlined and briefly discussed (R.B. Johnson 284). However, some scholars have pointed out that the writing of these sections has sometimes evolved into a box-ticking exercise without much genuine reflection. Bhavnani et al. criticize the "simplistic reflexive practice of taking a moment in research to account for one's positionality and then moving on to conduct normative field work" (173). They remark that ideally, positionality "is not about being reflexive but about understanding the sociohistorical/political context from which research is created and thus engages with the micropolitics of a research endeavor" (172). Though the focus is different, this discourse on positionality engages with the same kinds of issues pointed out by scholars who remark that objective research is not possible, because of researchers' entanglement with what they study. In recognizing both of the above views, I thus want to acknowledge some key predispositions and biases, and the deeper "sociohistorical/political context" that informed my research project.

For my reflection on my predispositions and biases, I will limit myself to those that are most significant for my research. I take my inspiration here from Philip Nel and Ada Bieber's comments on their positionality in their recent article on multiculturalism in German picturebooks. They write how "because our embodied selves shape what we understand and misunderstand, we want to make explicit our potential strengths and deficits" (2). In their case, they emphasised aspects of their identity in light of cultural notions. In my case, I will emphasize age. I conducted this research as a white, cisgendered man in my mid-to-late twenties, born and socialized in Belgium. As a result, in my endeavour to find patterns and contrasts within the reflections offered by readers of a range of different ages and socio-cultural and economic backgrounds, I had to navigate a lack of personal lived experience. While I have first-hand knowledge of what it means to be a child, adolescent and early adult, I am also distinctly aware that this only offers me a limited perspective on these age groups. There are vastly more ways of experiencing childhood, adolescence and early adulthood than the ones I am personally familiar with. Though I made conscious efforts to leave my own expectations regarding age behind

during my interactions with participants, I am aware that my reactions and follow-up questions to participants' comments were inevitably influenced by them. I have attempted to engage with all beliefs and ideas expressed by participants from a position of empathy and understanding. Furthermore, throughout my research, my own engagement with, and personal views on, constructions of age were also fluid. Beyond what I can report in this thesis, extensively interviewing participants on age also changed my personal views and beliefs. At several instances, younger readers surprised me, not only with their courage to question older readers during the focus groups, but also with their awareness of how adults (wrongfully) perceive them. Meanwhile, from older readers I gained new perspectives on adulthood and old age. For example, whether it is desirable to be wise and whether wisdom is indeed tied to age and experience. In short, I find myself finishing this thesis with a more open and complex view on what age means for myself and others.

Discussing all the "micropolitics" of my research project (Bhavnani et al. 172) is unfeasible, but there is one core aspect that should be spotlighted. Simply put, there is a fundamental, unavoidable question of how my own age and the age of participants influenced the recruitment and communication with participants, and the data-gathering process. Debra Harwood has published on the intricacies of conducting research with child participants. She argues that "it is impossible to achieve complete elimination of the adult-child inequalities that are inherently a part of the dissimilar ages" (Harwood 8). In my case, the inequalities extended beyond an adult-child dichotomy because age itself "becomes metonymous with superiority" (Beauvais, *Time* 86). There are several points in this dissertation where I explore the implications of readers' engagement with me as a mid-twenties researcher, both from the perspective of younger and older participants. All of this came with "specific challenges of gaining access, consent, and addressing the researcher's role […] within the research process" (Harwood 7). The point is that, regardless of any approach I have to my own biases, my age and the age of participants itself biased the data in unavoidable ways. It is not difficult to imagine participants reacting in other ways to the same questions if I had been younger or older. For example, in my interview with Jasper (63), he was comfortable with positioning himself as wiser than me, commenting that I was "of course still a young rascal."[8] In contrast, the youngest participants sometimes were more deferential, and I needed to be especially clear that the interview was a space in which I wanted to hear their actual thoughts, and that there was no "correct" answer. These nuances need to be acknowledged because this research takes age as one of its key objects of study. Thus, even in the sections where I attempt to adopt a more distant perspective as an objective observer, I cannot claim that the data itself was produced in an "ageless" context. Having established this groundwork, I will now move on to discussing the participants of this research project.

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[8] Original text: "Gij zijt natuurlijk nog een jonge snuik he."

## 2.2 Participants

This section will begin with a short reflection on working with participants in qualitative research, and the significance of "generalizability." Later, in section 2.2.1., I explore how participants were recruited, while section 2.2.2. reflects on the demographics of my sample and the significance this has for my analysis. First and foremost, in qualitative research: "generalizability is not the major purpose" (R.B. Johnson 289), because – on the one hand – qualitative projects do not tend to select participants randomly, and on the other hand, often "the goal is to show what is unique about a certain group of people, or a certain event, rather than generate findings that are broadly applicable" (R.B. Johnson 289; see also Fern 8). As a result, qualitative research often works with small sample sizes, which do "not aim at the kind of scope that representative, enumerative studies may provide, but rather at depth" (Blatterer, "Redefinition" 3.8). Some qualitative researchers go as far as fully renouncing generalizability as being relevant at all (Janesick 305), while others adopt alternatives that reconceptualize what generalizability can mean for qualitative researchers. Fjällström and Kokkola, for example, mention the term "ecological validity" for qualitative research, which describes "the extent to which the data reflect the 'normal' situation" (400). Hubble and Tew remark that qualitative work can highlight real-world dynamics through analytical induction instead of statistics and representativity. This is built on "the cogency of the theoretical argument linking the elements in an intelligible way rather than the statistical representativeness of the sample" (61).

### 2.2.1 Purposeful sampling

Thus, strict generalizability or representativity was not a core pillar of how I approached recruiting participants. For instance, participants were not selected randomly. Instead, the primary intent was to purposefully assemble participant groups of a wide mix of ages, starting at 9 years old. This minimum age was set based on the books I chose to work with, which were intended for readers of 9 years and older. To assemble the reading groups, I first recruited a large group of readers of all ages. Although attempts were made to recruit readers from a variety of socio-economic groups, given the choice between two readers of different ages, or two readers of different socio-economic groups, age was prioritized. When discussing my participants' ages in this thesis, I group them together using the CAFYR age model, which was established to create continuity in the use of age groups. [9]

- infant: ages 0 to 2
- child: ages 3 to 11
    - earlychild: ages 3 to 5
    - middlechild: ages 6 to 8
    - latechild: ages 9 to 11

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[9] This model combines elements of models proposed by Lorraine Green and Thomas Armstrong

- adolescent: ages 12 to 19
- adult: ages 20 and above
  - earlyadult: ages 20 to 39
    - twenties: ages 20 to 29
    - thirties: ages 30 to 39
  - middleadult: ages 40 to 59
    - forties: ages 40 to 49
    - fifties: ages 50 to 59
  - oldadult: ages 60 to 79
    - sixties: ages 60 to 69
    - seventies: ages 70 to 79
  - deepoldadult: ages 80 to 100
    - eighties: ages 80 to 89
    - nineties: ages 90 to 100

## 2.2.2 Recruitment

Finding participants for qualitative research is not easy. Handbooks of qualitative research often include whole chapters dedicated to advising the burgeoning researcher on how to find participants in the first place (e.g. Seidman 40; Magnusson and Marecek 37). Some researchers circumvent questions of consent and participant recruitment by working with their own relatives and friends (e.g. Maureen and Hugh Crago worked with their own daughter), but this is frowned upon by some. Irving Seidman remarks that:

> interviewers and the participants who are friends usually assume that they understand each other. Instead of exploring assumptions and seeking clarity about events and experiences, they tend to assume that they know what is being said. The interviewer and the participant need to have enough distance from each other that they take nothing for granted (42).

Recruiting more suitable participants can take on several different forms. Eva Magnusson and Jeanne Marecek write about advertising, chain referrals and targeted nominations as three common options (38-39). Advertising is more likely to be done in cases where a reward is offered for participation. Targeted nominations are about asking people who are not participants themselves to "name one potential participant who fits a particular set of characteristics" (38) while chain referrals entail asking participants whether they know anyone else who may be interested in participating, which is also called "snowball sampling" (38) and is – for example – one of the methods Waller cites as using in her reader-response project (199). Progress can also be made by working through "gatekeepers", i.e. individuals in positions of power or of social importance who can "facilitate participant recruitment" for you by providing access or promoting your work (Conradson 137).

Between May 2020 and May 2022, I recruited readers using a variety of methods. It is important to acknowledge here that the start of this research project coincided with Belgium's first COVID-lockdown. This presented me with a set of opportunities and challenges. Many people were now working from home, and with non-essential movement being strongly discouraged, people found themselves with little to do, giving them time to read. At the same time, however, opportunities to recruit readers face-to-face disappeared, forcing me to rely on mainly digital or indirect methods. The calls for participation that I spread online received a wealth of responses, but mainly from readers in their thirties, forties and fifties. Older people in particular have less of a presence online, and making personal visits to, for example, retirement homes was not possible during the first year of the pandemic. This made it easier (and sometimes necessary) to reach older participants via gatekeepers. Below, I outline the methods I used to navigate participant recruitment.

### 2.2.2.1 *Flyers*
In April and May of 2020, I wanted to capitalize on people being stuck at home during the lockdowns, and made 3 trips through Antwerp to put 500 flyers about the research project in mailboxes. Due to the low reply rate to these flyers, and the comparatively large time-investment required, this method was deemed inefficient and abandoned. Two participants (4% of total participants) were recruited via flyers.

### 2.2.2.2 *Prior interest*
I contacted a list of 40 candidates who had shown interest in participating in this project at the University of Antwerp's "Day of Science"; a science-communication event aimed at promoting the university and informing the broader public about the university's current projects. There were some replies, and ultimately 4 people of that list (8% of total participants) committed to participating.

### 2.2.2.3 *Social media*
In April 2020, my supervisor Vanessa Joosen and I spread calls for participation in Antwerp neighborhood Facebook groups, some of which were then reposted by users themselves in other groups we had no access to. In April 2021, a second social media call for participation was spread via Twitter. Combined, these posts led to dozens of mails from interested participants. In total, 16 participants (32% of total participants) were recruited through these methods.

### 2.2.2.4 *Gatekeepers*
During the whole project, I was offered assistance from a number of gatekeepers who were willing to use their personal and professional networks to help me find participants. Some of these gatekeepers were initial participants who enjoyed the process and proposed helping me find more readers (i.e. "snowball sampling"). The largest influx of participants came in response to a reference to my research project in the newsletter of a local non-profit organization, De Dagen, which promoted reading and book-centred

events. Additionally, I had help from several educators, ranging from primary school teachers to university-level instructors, who allowed me to inform their students about my work. My old high-school's newspaper wrote an article about my doctoral research, which led to one further reader contacting me. In total, 28 participants (56% of total participants) were recruited via these methods. More than half of these participants were recruited through De Dagen.

Before discussing the demographics of my sample of participants, I want to end this section on participant recruitment by reflecting on consent and the ethics of this research project.

### 2.2.2.5 *Consent and ethics*

This study was approved by an independent ethics board.[10] They assessed, among other aspects, the methodology, forms of consent and GDPR compliance of this research project.

Interested readers received a standardized information leaflet that outlined the intent of the research project, what their participation would entail, and how their personal data would be protected. If they chose to participate, they were asked to fill in a consent form. An example of a blank consent form is included in appendix 2. With underaged participants, a separate information leaflet and consent form was offered to participants' guardians and the participant themselves. These covered the same information, but the information was slightly simplified for younger participants.

In line with King and Horrocks' observation that it is generally good practice "to check during data collection and afterwards that the participant still […] is happy to continue taking part in it" (99), readers were informed throughout the whole recruitment process, and at several points during data collection, that participation was completely voluntary. They had the option to withdraw from participation at any point during the research project. No reader withdrew participation during or after the first interview, but several readers opted out after initially filling in a consent form and showing interest. In these cases, they rarely provided a reason. Often they simply stopped replying. No monetary reward was offered, but participants received a free copy of an unrelated book to thank them for their participation.

### 2.2.3 Demographic trends within my group of participants

In the table below I list all participants and their key characteristics: age, sex, focus group participation and how they were recruited. All participant names mentioned in this table and throughout the thesis are pseudonyms. Participants were given the option to provide their own pseudonym, and were given one if they had no preference. In the column for focus group participation, an "x" indicates this person did not participate, while a number indicates whether that person participated in the first or second focus group. In this

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[10] The University of Antwerp's "Ethische Adviescommissie Sociale en Humane Wetenschappen" (EA SHW).

section of the methodological framework, I want to highlight some trends regarding the demographics of my sample of participants and acknowledge some of the resulting limitations of my analyses. This table does not represent everyone who showed interest in participating. There were more interested readers who signed consent forms, but were not selected for various reasons I touch upon below.

| *Iep!* (1996) Joke Van Leeuwen — n=20 | | | | | *Voor altijd samen, amen* (1999) Guus Kuijer — n=20 | | | | | *My Name Is Mina* (2010) David Almond — n=11 | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Pseudonym | Age | Sex | Focus group | Recruited via | Pseudonym | Age | Sex | Focus group | Recruited via | Pseudonym | Age | Sex | Recruited via | Topic |
| Ella | 9 | F | 1 | FB-group | Jeroen | 10 | M | X | De Dagen | Mathijs | 9 | M | Twitter | Memories |
| Louise | 9 | F | 2 | Day of Science | David | 10 | M | 1 | Gatekeepers | Merlijn | 11 | M | Twitter | Memories |
| Agamemnon | 11 | M | X | Gatekeepers | Katrijn | 13 | F | X | Day of Science | Abby | 23 | F | Twitter | Memories |
| Floor | 11 | F | X | Day of Science | Dirk | 15 | M | X | Gatekeepers | Siena | 30 | F | Twitter | Memories |
| Janne | 14 | F | X | FB-group | Emily | 23 | F | X | Gatekeepers | Barbara | 38 | F | De Dagen | Memories |
| Fons | 19 | M | X | Gatekeepers | Beatrijs | 26 | F | X | Twitter | Empee | 79 | M | High-school newspaper | Memories |
| Aniek | 27 | F | 1 | Gatekeepers | Joke | 27 | F | X | De Dagen | Michiel | 12 | M | Twitter | Extraordinary activities |
| Helena | 28 | F | 2 | De Dagen | Lebronella | 30 | F | 2 | FB-group | Leen | 30 | F | Twitter | Extraordinary activities |
| Jasmijn | 30 | F | X | FB-group | Tilly | 36 | F | 1 | De Dagen | Marie | 46 | F | De Dagen | Extraordinary activities |
| Ans | 33 | F | X | Flyers | Malu | 38 | F | X | De Dagen | Griet | 58 | F | Twitter | Extraordinary activities |
| Akke | 41 | F | 2 | Day of Science | Maaike | 42 | F | 1 | De Dagen | Astrid | 68 | F | Twitter | Extraordinary activities |
| Moon | 41 | F | 1 | FB-group | Madelief | 45 | F | X | De Dagen | | | | | |
| Boris | 49 | F | X | FB-group | Marjolein | 47 | F | X | De Dagen | | | | | |
| Clara | 50 | F | X | FB-group | Oonis | 52 | F | X | De Dagen | | | | | |
| Kling | 55 | F | 2 | De Dagen | Alice | 57 | F | X | De Dagen | | | | | |
| Tommy | 60 | F | X | De Dagen | Sieglinde | 59 | F | 2 | De Dagen | | | | | |
| Jasper | 63 | M | 1 | Flyers | Roma | 62 | F | 1 | De Dagen | | | | | |
| Eline | 67 | F | 1 | Gatekeepers | Femke | 62 | F | 2 | De Dagen | | | | | |
| Margareta | 73 | F | 2 | De Dagen | Mathilde | 68 | F | 1 | De Dagen | | | | | |
| Fieke | 75 | F | X | Gatekeepers | Carolien | 69 | F | X | Gatekeepers | | | | | |

Recruited via:

| Flyers | FB-group | Gatekeepers |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Day of Science | De Dagen | Twitter |
| High-school newspaper | | |

*Table 1: participant information (N=51)*

In total, 51 participants were interviewed across all books. All participants were Flemish and most lived in or near Antwerp. Participants were between the ages of 9 and 79. This fit exactly within the boundaries of the CAFYR age model's "latechild" and "oldadult" age groups. Participants were spread across these age categories as follows:

- Latechild (9-11): 8 participants (15%)
- Adolescent (12-19): 5 participants (10%)
- Earlyadult (20-39): 14 participants (27%)
- Middleadult (40-59): 13 participants (25%)
- Oldadult (60-79): 11 participants (22%)

While representativity and generalizability are not the goals of qualitative research, I still want to acknowledge some of the limitations of my sample. The slightly lower percentage of late child participants is a direct consequence of that age group only covering three years, significantly less than the age-ranges of the other age groups.

Recruiting adolescent participants was difficult. Younger readers' participation was guided by their parents, who tended to be the ones who saw my calls for participation. Accordingly, communication for every participant younger than 13 was conducted completely through parents. Adolescent readers, in contrast, autonomously contacted me and decided by themselves whether or not to participate. Compared to early adult readers, adolescents showed less interest in participating in my research project. While they are the least represented group in my sample, I did interview at least one adolescent reader per book.

I did not make an active choice to exclude "deepoldadults." In fact, several attempts were made to recruit readers in their eighties and nineties for this research project. For example, I contacted Flanders' OKRA organisation, which organizes various social events and activities for older people, including reading groups. They put me in touch with multiple potential participants. However, after exchanging several mails, none opted to participate. Further contact was made with one reader in her 80s who showed initial interest and received a copy of *Voor altijd samen, amen,* but ended up withdrawing from the research project before the first interview.

Throughout the whole research process, my calls for participation ended up attracting mostly early and middle adult white, female, middle-class readers, with 80% (41/51) of participants across all books being women. The struggle to find male readers is acknowledged by several other reader-response scholars. Waller writes how "the individuals I have corresponded with and interviewed do not act as a representative set, nor a comprehensive overview of possible responses, [...] not least because around three quarters of my participants were female [and] the majority were white, middle-class and well-educated" (10). In a similar vein, Nick Hubble and Philip Tew remark that some of the trends they describe in their analyses can be biased by "the majority of respondents being female" (31). Finally, Bruce and Rowena Stening's participants also consisted of 78% women (294).

I should also acknowledge that across all age groups, I mostly ended up recruiting avid readers, which likely also influenced the results. The nature of the research-project itself

appealed most to people who enjoy reading in the first place, and some of my recruitment methods (e.g. De Dagen mailing list) further reinforced this by contacting people who had subscribed to literary-themed newsletters. Several readers referenced other books and their childhood experiences with reading during the interviews and focus group conversations.

To an extent, the lack of interest by some groups was mitigated by the deliberate effort put into assembling diverse reading groups. Whenever available, male participants, adolescent participants and participants from other less-represented groups were included in an interview cycle. An unfortunate consequence was that more than a dozen female readers between the ages of 9 and 66 had shown interest but were not interviewed because they were already overrepresented in the sample.

In summary, my sample of participants is not statistically representative, but it also was not intended to be. Like Waller's interviewees, they do not serve as a "representative set, nor a comprehensive overview" (10). My primary intent throughout the whole recruitment and interview process, was to explore how readers' ages influenced their understanding of age in literature for young readers. For that purpose, the participants I worked with offer a diverse sample of readers of various ages. In my analyses, I engage with their perspectives in depth, not with the intent to offer generalizable claims that are true for the whole population, but to offer an overview of the dynamics that are at play in this yet-unexplored gap where a reader's age meets and shapes their perspective on age in children's literature. Furthermore, as my later analyses demonstrate, the fact that my participants skewed towards being white and middle-class in no way seems to have led to a homogeneous view on age and children's literature. Hermanowicz remarks that qualitative methods "open a window through which others are able to see how people understand themselves and social situations" (491). I believe it is important that I recognize that the windows I have opened only offered limited vistas, without diminishing the value of what we end up seeing.

## 2.3 Data collection

This section will begin with a summarized outline of the entire data collection process, emphasizing how the interviews, focus group conversations and related activities were organized and executed. Afterwards, I reflect on semi-structured interviews and focus group conversations as data gathering tools, and highlight why those methods were chosen. Finally, I discuss my research instruments in more detail, briefly exploring why I opted to work with *Iep!, Voor altijd samen, amen* and *My Name Is Mina,* while also highlighting the construction of the interview and focus group guides in particular.

## 2.3.1 **Method**

I gathered data through 50 semi-structured interviews, 4 focus group conversations and 17 shorter follow-up interviews in which participants reflected on their prior answers and experiences during the study. The interviews took place between May 2020 and May 2022 and were all conducted in Dutch. The interviews focused on the books in the order that I have listed them throughout this text: the interviews about *Iep!* were first, *Voor altijd samen, amen* second, and *My Name Is Mina* last. Though my interviews and focus group conversations were initially intended to be conducted in person, the COVID-19 pandemic forced me to move my interviews online. For the online discussions, I used the GDPR-compliant platform Blackboard Collaborate, which allows for video and audio conversations with multiple participants and has built-in recording capabilities. Both audio and video were recorded and transcribed (with participant permission). Interview and focus group recordings were only stored on the University of Antwerp's own Nextcloud storage server. InqScribe – the transcription software I used – is also GDPR compliant and strictly offline. Transcripts were anonymized. This included the use of pseudonyms and the removal of any personal information the participants shared. These anonymized transcripts were uploaded to NVivo for analysis. In total, my research produced 420.000 words of transcript data.

All the interviews for *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen* followed the same procedure. A group of ten readers of different ages was selected from the general list of participants. These readers received a copy of *Iep!* or *Voor altijd samen, amen* by mail and were given +/- 2 weeks to read the book. I first conducted an hour-long semi-structured interview with each individual participant. This was followed by a focus group conversation to which every participant was invited, but in each instance, only 4-5 participants chose to join in the focus group conversation. All participants of the focus group conversations later briefly joined me again for an individual 15-min follow-up semi-structured interview in which we reflected on their experiences during the first interview and focus group conversation. I conducted two of these cycles of initial interviews, focus group conversations and secondary interviews for *Iep!* and two complete cycles for *Voor altijd samen, amen*.

I also gathered data for *My Name Is Mina* through semi-structured interviews, though they were conducted from slightly different angles. For *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen*, participants were only asked to read the story. For *My Name Is Mina,* I asked readers to prepare for our interview by engaging with the story through more specific activities. One group of five readers was asked to reflect on the memories that were prompted by the story. Another group of five readers was asked to engage with as many of the story's "extraordinary activities" as possible. These activities are various assignments presented to the reader by the main character (see appendix 9.1 for a complete list). I provided the readers who were asked to keep track of their memories with sticky notes, so that they could write down key words or short phrases about their memories and stick them next to

sections of the book that prompted them. The group of readers who I asked to engage with Mina's extraordinary activities were given a notebook alongside their copy of the book, as some of Mina's activities are writing or drawing assignments.

I should also acknowledge that there are three exceptions to the approaches outlined above. My interview with Jasper (63) was conducted over the phone as he was unable to connect his microphone to Blackboard Collaborate, while Empee (79) requested to conduct the interview in person, as he disliked digital communication tools. Empee was therefore the only reader I interviewed in-person, respecting COVID regulations at that point. Finally, Mathijs (9) and Merlijn (11) are brothers and preferred to participate together in a duo-interview, which is why I conducted 50 interviews, but discuss 51 participants.

Following this broader outline of my data gathering methodology, I will now highlight the merits of semi-structured interviews and focus group conversations that made them particularly suitable for this research project. Afterwards, I will explore the specific interview and focus group guides that I developed.

### 2.3.1.1 *Semi-Structured Interviews*
Semi-structured interviews are one of several kinds of interviews that are used in qualitative research. For example, Cohen et al. list "standardized interviews," "ethnographic interviews" and "life history interviews" as some alternative interview types (270). These different kinds of interviews all have a similar purpose at their core, they help researchers understand "the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman 9). With the help of interviews, researchers can uncover "full and rich accounts of how people see the world, what sense they make of it, and what concerns they bring to their lives" (Magnusson and Marecek 7). In that regard, interviews can uncover insights that cannot be reached through other means. Irving Seidman remarks that

> A researcher can approach the experience of people [...] through examining personal and institutional documents, through observation, through exploring history, through experimentation, through questionnaires and surveys, and through a review of existing literature. If the researcher's goal, however, is to understand the meaning people [...] make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary [...] avenue of inquiry. (11)

The distinctive feature of semi-structured interviews in particular is that "topics and open-ended questions are written but the exact sequence and wording does not have to be followed with each respondent" (Cohen et al. 278). This sets it apart from open-ended approaches, such as informal conversational interviews, in which there are no predetermined question topics and the "questions emerge from the immediate context and are asked in the natural course of things (Cohen et al. 271); and from directed

approaches such as quantitative interviews, in which questions are fixed and respondents choose from a list of possible answers (Cohen et al. 271).

Thus, in semi-structured interviews, the researcher generally prepares an interview guide, which covers a numbers of topics/research questions. During the interview, the researcher can modify questions, change the order, omit questions or improvise follow-up questions based on participant input. It allows the researcher to stick to the "agenda being set by the researcher's interests yet with room for the respondent's more spontaneous descriptions and narratives" (Brinkmann 470; see also Kvale 51). For my research, choosing the semi-structured interview as a main approach to data gathering made immediate sense. For each book, there was a set of core questions that I wanted to ask every single participant. This would allow me to pursue comparative analyses across several participant age-groups. At the same time, it provided me with the freedom to pursue the distinct uniqueness of each participant's view on age through unscripted follow-up questions. This allowed me to balance more general comparisons between groups of readers with deeper analyses of single participants.

### 2.3.1.2 *Focus Groups*

Focus group conversations are in some ways similar to interviews. Both approaches are qualitative in nature, consist of prolonged conversations and are guided by a researcher. The distinguishing feature of a focus group, as compared to a semi-structured interview, is that it consists of a group of participants who are encouraged to discuss a particular topic amongst themselves. This "interactive discussion [...] leads to a different type of data not accessible through individual interviews" (Hennink 2-3). Importantly, a focus group discussion is not a group interview. Compared to interviews, the researcher fades into the background as much as possible, and "participants talk amongst themselves rather than interacting only with the researcher, or 'moderator'" (Barbour 2).

In other words, a moderator's role in a focus group conversation is to be a "facilitator or discussion leader, not a discussion participant" (Fern 73). Rosaline Barbour offers the example of a moderator non-verbally coaxing a participant who has been silent for a long time:

> The longer they don't say anything, the more they are likely to feel that their first utterance is required to be especially pertinent and insightful. An invitation from the facilitator – even if this merely provides an opportunity to echo comments already made – can be a source of relief for the uncomfortable quiet group member. [...] The facilitator can provide an opening by, for example, picking up on non-verbal behaviour, such as smiling, nodding or looking surprised. (Barbour 82)

While many stress the importance of a skilled moderator for a good focus group (a.o. Puchta and Potter 2; Krueger and Casey (Epub); Fern 11), others tell stories of how an "unruly focus group who ignored and ridiculed the young researcher" ended up offering

fantastic data. Sometimes, the researcher "may emerge from a most successful group feeling that she has been holding a tiger by the tail for the last hour and a half" (Bloor et al. 48).

A common topic in discussions of focus groups is the "homogeneity" of the participants, referring to the degree to which the participants are similar in certain aspects (Morgan 353; Hennink 38; Fern 8; Greenbaum 35). The idea is that common ground helps participants to have a fruitful discussion. However, as David Conradson remarks, striving for homogeneity should not stray into attempting to find identical participants, but rather "broad social compatibility" i.e. "people who have enough in common to allow the development of a productive conversational dynamic" (133). What exactly constitutes this homogeneity depends on the research project. For some, it lies in the shared experiences between the participants, and demographic characteristics are less important (Morgan 353). Hennink, for example, argues that shared experiences create "a strong shared identity among participants that overrides the need to create homogeneity through demographic characteristics" (39). For others, it is instead these shared demographic characteristics that matter most, with an emphasis on the age and gender of the participants (Greenbaum 35).

My research on *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen* used focus group discussions "as an adjunct to other research methods such as individual interviewing" (Puchta and Potter 7). They served as the second stage in the data gathering process, as a follow-up to the individual interviews and a precursor to the final interviews which discussed readers' experiences during the focus-group. In my case, homogeneity was created through the shared experience of reading the book and participating in the individual interviews, with heterogeneity in age being a vital part of the focus group's intended dynamic. In the broadest sense, the goal was to use focus groups to observe if and how readers negotiate their perspectives on their own age and the age of characters in a conversation with readers of different ages. In that regard, it offered a dimension of inter-age dynamics different from the semi-structured interviews. Age is understood to be relational and is in part enacted through interaction (Pickard 176). Yet, in the individual interviews, participants interacted solely with a mid-twenties researcher. These focus groups gave me the opportunity to more acutely "mobilise relationalities as an element of research practice" (García-González and Deszcz-Tryhubczak 50). Furthermore, this also allowed me to explore whether group discussions about age can contribute to intergenerational understanding.

## 2.3.2 Research instruments

This section will explore my research instruments in more detail. I will begin by summarizing the three books I chose to work with, and highlight why these specific books were chosen. Then, I delve into my interview and focus group guides, and discuss the choices that were made there.

### 2.3.2.1 *The books*

To reiterate, the three books I conducted research with were *Iep!* (1996)*,* written by Joke van Leeuwen, *Voor altijd samen, amen* (1999), written by Guus Kuijer, and *My Name Is Mina* (2011)*,* written by David Almond.

### 2.3.2.1.1 *Iep!* – Joke van Leeuwen (1996) & *Voor altijd samen, amen* – Guus Kuijer (1999)

The age of the intended audience for *Iep!* is nine to twelve.[11] The story centres on Viegeltje: a girl who is part human and part bird. At the beginning of the story, she is found as a baby by Warre and Tine. The story offers little indication of how much time passes, but Warre and Tine raise Viegeltje, teaching her how to walk and talk. Her ability to talk remains simple, with limited vocabulary. During a trip to the big city, Viegeltje escapes and meets Loetje, a girl living with her father. Loetje and Viegeltje spend some time together, but Viegeltje once again flies away. Loetje, Warre and Tine encounter each other and join forces to track Viegeltje down. Along the way they meet the Rescuer, an otherwise unnamed character who is referred to by his profession, as someone who rescues people from various perilous circumstances. He believes Viegeltje to be a young girl who he failed to rescue and joins Loetje, Warre and Tine on their quest. Each of the characters manages to find the closure they are looking for, partly by encountering Viegeltje again, but also through meeting additional secondary characters.

*Iep!* was the first children's book that I selected to conduct interviews with. I was drawn to *Iep!* because it features a cast of characters that are presented as being different ages (via illustrations, group dynamics, familial ties), without mentioning any specific ages, and little in the way of contextual comments that indicate age. There are, for example, no metareflections that hint at the characters' ages. As a result, readers interpret a character's behaviour, clothing, speech and general existence through their own unique lens of age norms.

*Voor altijd samen, amen* is intended for readers of ten years and older. It is told from the perspective of Polleke, an eleven-year-old girl who is dumped by her boyfriend Mimoen at the beginning of the story. Soon after, she is horrified to learn that her single mother has started to date her teacher. As she tries to navigate this social quagmire, her drug-dealing father is jailed and disappears after being released. During the weekends, Polleke finds solace at her grandparents' farm, where a new calf is born. As the story unfolds, Polleke slowly grows accustomed to her teacher being her mother's boyfriend, while also learning to navigate her biological father's faults. The story closes with Polleke and Mimoen getting back together, as Mimoen defies his religious parents and briefly runs away with Polleke to her grandparents' farm.

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[11] According to the CBK *(Centraal Bestand Kinderboeken)*, an online catalogue created by multiple Dutch and Flemish organizations to centralize their children's literature collections.

I opted to conduct interviews centred on *Voor altijd samen, amen* because its approach to age complements *Iep!*. Where *Iep!* contains neither specific ages nor any real metareflections, *Voor altijd samen, amen* puts strong emphasis on both. The main character Polleke consistently reflects on her own age and the age of the other characters through meta-reflections such as "adults are soooo childish! They tell me no allll the time. I say no once, and they start scowling"[12] (92). The interviews I conducted for *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen* are thus complementary. While *Iep!* gives no information about age, *Voor altijd samen, amen* heavily emphasizes it through the reflections of the main character.

Here, I also want to acknowledge that *Voor altijd samen, amen* is comparatively underexplored in this thesis. My data gathering started with *Iep!*. As I did not want to delay data analysis until after all interviews were complete, I published several articles on *Iep!* while still gathering data on *Voor altijd samen, amen.* As a result, the *Voor altijd samen, amen* data is discussed in these analyses, but to a smaller degree than *Iep!*. My goal is to explore those interviews in more detail in future articles/publications.

### 2.3.2.1.2 *My Name Is Mina* – David Almond (2010)

*My Name Is Mina* is a prequel to *Skellig* (1998). It expands the backstory of Mina McKee, the girl living across the street from *Skellig's* protagonist Michael. The novel is presented as Mina's journal and details the period leading up to Mina's meeting with Michael. In her journal, Mina plays with various forms of fiction and storytelling as she shares her thoughts on life, education, her relationship with her mother and more. She experiments with both form and content, writing in the first and third-person (36), using various typefaces, including several pages of white text on a black background, adding a selection of poems, and so on. One particularly notable aspect of the book's presentation as Mina's notebook is the inclusion of the "extraordinary activities" which Mina offers to her reader. For example: "Stare at the stars. Travel through space and time. Hold your head and know that you are extraordinary. Remind yourself that you are dust. Remind yourself that you are a star. Stand beneath a streetlamp. Dance and glitter in a shaft of light".

*My Name Is Mina* was chosen for several reasons. First of all, the *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen* interviews had provided a significant quantity of data using a mostly standard semi-structured interview approach. I wished to deviate somewhat from this initial methodology, with the intent of gathering other kinds of data. I was drawn to *Mina* because of its extraordinary activities. By asking readers to complete these activities, I would be able to both explore their direct reflections on the book and the activities, and also gain access to creative and artistic expressions that are still part of the reader's response. I was especially curious how readers would approach activities like "Write a story about yourself as if you're writing about somebody else" and "Write a story about

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[12] "Grote mensen zijn zooo kinderachtig! Ze zeggen zooo vaak nee tegen mij. Zeg ík een keer nee, dan krijg je zo'n gezicht."

somebody else as if you're writing about yourself" (50). Furthermore, I also opted to work with *Mina* because it offered an opportunity to collaborate with a fellow member of the CAFYR team: Emma-Louise Silva. Her research explores (children's) literature from the perspective of cognitive narratology, and she has a particular interest in Almond's work. The added benefit for my thesis was that collaborating with another scholar deepens an analysis in terms of investigator triangulation (R.B. Johnson 283). Put simply, I was excited to have a second pair of eyes on the qualitative data and someone to collaborate with. Together with Emma-Louise Silva, I developed a set of interviews based on exploring the memories that are prompted in readers by their reading of the book.

The version of *My Name is Mina* that I worked with, is its Dutch translation, *Mijn naam is Nina.* The translation does not change the book in ways that would obviously lead to divergent interpretations, but there are nevertheless some differences. For instance, some of the characters' names are changed into more Dutch-sounding equivalents: Mina becomes Nina, and her teacher Mrs. Scullery becomes Juf Suf (Mrs. Dull). The Dutch translation is unfortunately out of print, which is why readers received a printed scan of the book. In addition, to be able to engage with one particular extraordinary activity, readers were given a scanned copy of the Dutch translation of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Though readers read and discussed the Dutch translation, I opted to use quotes from the original English version throughout this dissertation. I could have retranslated the Dutch back to English myself, but that would add another layer of interpretation. I used an epub edition for the original English quotes, hence the lack of page numbers.

### 2.3.2.2 *The interview and focus group guides*

Four full interview guides have been included in the appendices, one for *Iep!* (appendix 3), one for *Voor altijd samen, amen* (appendix 5) and one for each type of interview I conducted with *My Name Is Mina* (appendices 8 and 9)*.* As part of the second interview guide for *My Name Is Mina,* I added a full list of the prompts for the extraordinary activities (appendix 9.1). I also added the focus group guides I used with *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen* (appendices 4 and 6), and an example of an interview guide I used for a follow-up interview (appendix 7). The following section will highlight the thought-process behind the creation of these guides, and provide broader commentary on their content.

I want to begin this discussion by acknowledging that the interview guides were living documents throughout the research process. In the course of an interview cycle, I sometimes modified and tweaked the guide depending on how well some questions worked and how participants responded to them. The interview guides included in the appendices are the final versions of those guides as they existed at the end of the interview cycles. This approach may seem problematic for some quantitatively-inclined scholars, but is in fact common in qualitative interview-based research. Magnusson and Marecek remark that for some researchers, "changing one's hypothesis or altering one's

procedures in the course of a study is seen as tantamount to fraud […] However, interpretative research is not about hypothesis testing" (33). Instead, interview guides and even research questions are often changed in the course of an interview cycle: "as researchers learn from their participants, they alter their ideas […]. Often this requires modifying some elements of the research procedure, such as expanding the number of participants or changing some of the interview questions" (33).

Of course, the core intent and general layout of the interview guide remained the same throughout the whole process, but the phrasing of questions sometimes changed, and so did their priority. Some questions produced few to no useful answers and were dropped from the interview guide. Throughout all guides, but especially in those for *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen*, I tweaked the priority of questions by using colours to differentiate their importance. Green questions were asked every single time. These produced interesting responses, or were identified early on as providing a useful anchor for later analyses. Yellow questions were of secondary importance, but were asked whenever other questions yielded few responses. Unmarked questions were kept in mind in case a reader spontaneously touched upon topics related to those questions. These tended to be similar to questions that were already asked, or topics that were deemed interesting but less important than others.

### 2.3.2.2.1 Adapting research questions into interview questions
Across all interview guides, questions generally fell under one of two groups. Some questions were a direct translation of specific research questions, while others were intended to solicit broader reflections that had the potential to be relevant for several research questions. For example, the research question: "When readers pick a favourite/least favourite character, do they bring up age?" was translated into the following specific set of interview questions:

- What was your favourite character?
    o Why?
    o Does that character behave in the way you'd expect from someone that age?
    o Do you think the character's age is important for it to be your favourite?[13]

Other research questions were more difficult to directly transform into interview questions. For example, research question: "Which age norms are validated/challenged by

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[13] Original text:
- Wat was je favoriet personage?
    o Waarom?
    o Gedraagt dat personage zich zoals jij zou verwachten dat iemand van die leeftijd zich gedraagt? Op welke manier?
    o Denk je dat de leeftijd van het personage er iets mee te maken heeft waarom je dat personage leuker vindt dan andere personages?

the participants in their responses to age in children's literature and is there a relation to the age of the reader?" Treating abstract research questions as direct interview questions can be a pitfall in interview design. Magnusson and Marecek offer the example of a student who wanted to ask ten-year-olds: "How does your body image affect your identity?" (52). Instead, within a good interview guide: "the research questions are given a form that renders them suitable to be posed […] as interview questions" (Brinkmann 470). Thus, I did not ask directly about age norms, as this concept is likely foreign to many readers. Instead, my research question about age norms was covered by more general questions such as:

- The book does not tell us how old Warre and Tine are, so how old do you think they are?
    - Why?
    - Why are they not [old/young/adult] for you?
- What do you like about being your age?
    - Are there any downsides about being your age?
- At one point Polleke thinks: "I've never heard about such a thing. A man his age. Not married!" Did that statement affect your view on Wouter's age?[14]

As a result, the interview guides contain several questions that were not tied to one research question in particular, but were intended "to generate spontaneous and rich descriptions" that could then help answer a number of research questions (Kvale 58).

### 2.3.2.2.2 The beginning and ending of the interview guides

One final common thread across all interview guides is that they start and end in the same way. Each interview starts with a brief introductory section that was intended to "establish the terms of the interview, to set a conversational tone, and to begin to build a relationship between yourself and the participant" (Magnusson and Marecek 55-56; See also Kvale 55). During my first interviews, I developed a routine set of remarks that were intended to put the participant at ease and offer further context regarding the interview. Confidentiality and the completely voluntary nature of participation was reestablished at the start of every interview with every participant. I also mentioned that the interview would be recorded and asked permission before I started the recording. At the end of each

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[14] Original text:
- In het boek zeggen ze niet hoe oud Warre en Tine zijn, maar hoe oud denk jij dat ze zijn?
    - Waarom?
    - Waarom zijn ze niet [oud/jong/volwassen/…] volgens jou?
- Wat vind jij zoal leuk aan jouw leeftijd?
    - En zijn er ook nadelen aan jouw leeftijd?
- Op een bepaald punt denkt Polleke: "Daar had ik nog nooit van gehoord. Een man van zijn leeftijd. Niet getrouwd!" Heeft die uitspraak jouw kijk op de leeftijd van Wouter veranderd?

interview, I reserved five minutes for readers to offer final reflections on any topic related to the interview.

### 2.3.2.2.3 *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen*
Interviews

The driving intent across the interviews for these two books was to obtain useful data for as many research questions as possible. Thus, the interview questions were designed to elicit a broad range of replies about readers' perspectives on their own age, the age of characters, the interplay between age and the experience of literature, and the role of age in various intergenerational dynamics in the books. The interview questions therefore covered topics such as readers' reading habits and the construction of age in the book, and in particular readers' understanding of characterization and their interpretation and assessment of certain characters, statements, and conflicts.

The interview guides were structured in three core phases which progressed from initially open-ended questions such as: "How would you rank the characters based on age?", or "What character do you think is closest to you in age? Why?" to more specific questions such as: "What do you think of the friendship between [character x and y]?", and finally focussed on precise scenes from the books where concrete quotes, or illustrations depicting a specific character, were discussed. The intent behind this was to avoid steering the conversation into a particular direction until late in the interview, and to "encourage participants to tell about their experiences in their own words and in their own way without being constrained by categories or classifications imposed by the interviewer" (Magnusson and Marecek 45; see also King and Horrocks 51; Kvale 88). By starting with broad and open questions, I received comparatively more varied responses in the first 15 minutes of the interview, with participants often emphasizing completely different sections of the book. At the same time, the review of specific scenes at the end of every interview still left me with key moments from the book that are discussed by every participant, which allowed for more detailed comparisons as well.

Prior to the interviews for *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen*, readers were asked to complete a short preparatory form (see appendices 3.1 and 5.1). The answers from this form were then used as prompts during the interviews. For *Iep!,* readers were asked to rank 8 central characters based on their perceived age. For *Voor altijd samen, amen*, the form was expanded slightly. First, readers were asked the same ranking question of the central characters. Additionally, I also presented readers with a list of 8 of Polleke's metareflections. For each metareflection, I requested readers indicate whether they agreed, disagreed, or had no strong opinion about it. Finally, readers picked one of the metareflections to discuss during the interview. The reasoning behind this choice was purposefully left up to the participant. This was phrased as follows: "Choose one statement about age that you would like to discuss during the interview. The reason why is up to

you."[15] During the interview, readers' agreement or disagreement with these metareflections was discussed, with special attention paid to the specific metareflection they selected.

## Focus Groups

The focus groups were intended to be a space for discussion among participants, with little direct involvement from the researcher. As the moderator, my interference in the conversation was limited to keeping the discussion on topic and making sure that all participants had a chance to speak. The focus group conversations about *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen* used the same general approach as the interviews. To facilitate spontaneous conversation, I identified the questions and topics that prompted the deepest or most interesting reflections from readers during the individual interviews. During the focus group, I presented open-ended questions about these topics to the group, which was then left free to discuss among themselves. Some examples of these questions are "what are some of the most important things you look at to estimate a character's age if the book does not list one?"[16], or "do you think that how old you are affects how old you estimate the characters in a book to be?"[17]

In addition, a number of participant quotes were selected from the individual interviews for reasons of relevance or for their potential to prompt discussion. These tended to be concrete meta-reflections about age such as "I think that older people struggle more with losing a child. So I thought that [Warre and] Tine have a life ahead of them."[18] While the focus group guides include identifying information about the participant whose statement it is, these were presented anonymously to the group, to ensure no participant felt personally spotlighted if their quote was used.

In terms of structure, the focus groups consisted of three main phases. First, I asked the readers to collectively reflect on the age of the characters in *Iep!* or *Voor altijd samen, amen*. Second, several of the aforementioned participant quotes were anonymously presented and discussed. Finally, I asked some more general questions about the entanglement of readers' ages and their reading experience.

Like semi-structured interviews, the ideal timespan of a focus group discussion is around 1 hour. Longer sessions run the risk of causing participant fatigue which negatively impacts

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[15] Original text: Kies hieronder één uitspraak die jij graag wilt bespreken tijdens het interview. De reden waarom mag je zelf bepalen.

[16] Original text: Als jullie een boek lezen, en er wordt voor een personage geen leeftijd gegeven, wat zijn dan de belangrijkste dingen waar je op let om daar voor jezelf een leeftijd op te zetten?

[17] Original text: "Denken jullie dat hoe oud je bent bepaalt hoe oud je de personages van Voor altijd samen, amen inschat?"

[18] Original text: "Ja dat ze de veerkracht hadden om dat toch te plaatsen. Ik denk dat oudere mensen dat die moeilijker over dat verlies kunnen van een kind dus ik dacht ja Tine die hebben nog een leven voor zich." (Said by Eline 67)

the generated data (Hennink 62). Shorter sessions do not negatively impact data quality, but are too short to realize the full potential of a particular group of participants' experiences/opinions (Merton qtd. in Featherstone 20). The focus group guides contained more questions than needed for a one-hour discussion. As I had only planned to do one focus group per 10 interviews, I overprepared so that I had several back-up questions in case the conversation did not flow well.

### Follow-up interviews

The follow-up interviews were only 15 minutes long and were intended to offer participants a space to reflect on the individual interviews and the focus group conversation. As such, these interview guides are short and predominantly included questions that emphasize the potential impact of the interview and focus group conversation. For example:

- Did you learn something by participating in this project?
- Are there any ideas about age that you are now more aware of? Did the way you think about age change at all?
- Would you still estimate the characters to be the same ages as before you participated in the focus group?[19]

### 2.3.2.2.4 *My Name Is Mina*

Compared to the interviews for *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen*, both interview guides for *My Name Is Mina* were more focused. Instead of the broad variety of topics that I aimed to explore in the interviews on the first two books, the *Mina* interviews were created to delve extensively into a smaller group of more specific questions regarding readers' memories and their engagement with the extraordinary activities in *My Name Is Mina.*

### Memories

I developed this interview guide in collaboration with Emma-Louise Silva, a fellow scholar on the CAFYR project. Consequently, this interview guide reflects a mix of personal interests, i.e. topics Emma-Louise or I wished to explore on our own, and shared interests, i.e. those topics we wished to collaborate on. Below, I mainly highlight the aspects of this interview guide that were relevant for my own research and this thesis. What set this interview cycle apart from the others, was the preparatory assignment readers were asked to complete. The following task was communicated through mail to readers before they received the book:

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[19] Original text:
- Heb je iets bijgeleerd uit je deelname aan ons onderzoek?
- Zijn er ideeën over leeftijd waar je nu meer bewust van bent na deel te nemen aan het onderzoek? / Is de manier waarop je nadenkt over leeftijd veranderd?
- Zou je de personages nog steeds dezelfde leeftijden geven?

> One of the things we will talk about during the interview is memories. Therefore we'd like to ask you to mark the parts in *My Name is Mina* where you remember something. This does not need to be something that happened to you personally. It can be a story someone told you, or something you saw happen to someone else. Whenever you have such a memory while reading, mark it with a word or a short phrase (e.g. "car" or "trip to Italy") so you'll remember later what you were thinking about with that part of the book.[20]

This was adapted from an approach called "self-probed retrospection", which was coined by Steen Larsen and Uffe Seilman in the late 80s (420).

The main body of the interview consisted of two 25-minute sections. In the first section, Emma-Louise explored readers' engagement with the book though the lens of cognitive narratology, with a particular interest in 4E cognition. This field explores questions such as whether cognition is "embodied, embedded, extended, or enactive?", and "the precise way that brain, body, and environment are coupled or integrated in cognition" (Newen et al. 4). She was thus particularly interested in how, when and where readers read the book – the items (e.g. post-it notes) readers used to support their reading of the book and how this shaped their cognitive experience. Hence, this section includes questions such as "when did you read the book? Where did you read the book? How did you read the book?"[21] or "what do you think about getting to know Mina's thoughts through her notebook?"[22]

In the second section of this interview, I engaged with the memories that readers had marked in the book while reading. Because there was no way of knowing which memories readers would bring up during the interview, I prepared a more general set of questions such as:

- How old were you in this memory?
- How do you feel about this memory?
- Where your own memories important for you to connect to the characters?

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[20] Original text: Tijdens het interview gaan we het onder andere hebben over herinneringen. Daarom willen we je graag vragen om tijdens het lezen van Mijn naam is Nina aan te duiden wanneer het boek een herinnering bij je opwekt. Dit moet niet iets zijn dat je zelf hebt meegemaakt. Het kan een verhaal zijn waar je over hebt horen vertellen, of iets wat je met iemand hebt zien gebeuren. Als je tijdens het lezen aan zo een herinnering denkt, duid die dan aan met een woord of korte zin, (bv. "auto" of "reis naar Italië") zodat je later nog weet waar je aan dacht bij dat deel van het boek.

[21] Original text: Wanneer heb je het boek gelezen? Waar heb je het boek gelezen? Hoe heb je het boek gelezen?

[22] Original text: Wat vind je van het notitieboek als manier om Nina's gedachten te leren kennen?

- Did you notice that specific parts of the book prompted more memories than others? Why do you think that is?[23]

Using these questions as my point of entry, I improvised follow-up questions based on individual memories readers referred to. Finally, I included some questions on a particular moment of conflict from the book. This latter set of questions was of secondary importance and was included as a back-up option in case the memory activity did not work.

## Extraordinary activities

This interview guide starts with a handful of general questions which were intended to ease participants into the conversation and ask them about their general experience of reading *My Name Is Mina*. This part of the interview included questions such as "What did you think about engaging with these activities?" and "Was any activity more memorable for you than the others?"

After these introductory questions, the interviews shifted into discussing each extraordinary activity one-by-one. For each activity, I had prepared a set of questions to discuss readers' responses. For example, one extraordinary activity centers on the poetry of William Blake:

EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

Read the Poems of William Blake.

(Especially if you are Ms. Palaver.)

For this extraordinary activity, some of my questions were:

- What poems did you read?

- Why did you choose to read those ones?

- Do you understand why Mina might be a fan of William Blake?[24]

The intent was not to gather answers from every participant about every single activity. Rather, I allowed participants to dwell on activities they had stronger opinions about, and

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[23] Original text:
- Hoe oud was je in deze herinnering?
- Hoe voel je je bij deze herinneringen?
- Zijn er voor jou herinneringen die erg belangrijk waren om jouw blik op een personage vorm te geven?
- Merk je op dat je bij bepaalde delen van het boek meer herinneringen hebt aangeduid? Hoe denk je dat dat komt?

[24] Original text:
- Welke gedichten heb je gelezen?
- Waarom heb je die gedichten gekozen om te lezen?
- Zie je in waarom Nina een fan van William Blake is?

asked follow-up questions if interesting lines of thought emerged. In general, I attempted to find a balance between gathering enough responses about all activities to make broad comparisons, while capturing some of the deeper idiosyncrasies of particular readers' responses. I do not discuss every extraordinary activity in my analysis, but a complete list of all prompts has been added in appendix 9.1.

### 2.3.3 **Transcriptions**

After conducting my interviews, the recordings were transcribed. Ultimately, these transcripts are the data that most of my analyses are based on, not the recordings themselves. Thus, the choices that I made regarding the shape and content of the transcripts significantly influenced the analyses that were possible. Accordingly, this section will explore the decisions that I made regarding the transcription process, after contextualizing these in the broader discourse on transcripts in interview-based research.

Transcripts can be approached in different ways as part of a research project. As several scholars point out, this is not a question of finding the one way that is objectively "correct." In fact, "[t]here can be no single 'correct' transcription; rather the issue becomes whether, to what extent, and how a transcription is useful for the research" (Cohen et al. 282; see also Kvale 98; McGinn 884; Bucholtz 785). At the same time, researchers should be careful not to become careless in their adoption of transcription frameworks in light of such arguments. While, few "standard rules" (Kvale 94) exist, there is value in careful evaluation of the possibilities and choices that will affect the transcripts and their subsequent analysis. As Slembrouck has argued: "[r]eflection on transcription practice cannot ultimately overcome methodological difficulties, but it can alert scholars to important choices, the limitations that come with these and the socio-political issues which surround and inform them" (822). Thus, I want to start by highlighting some of the choices that can be made in the transcription process.

One of the most overt differences one can distinguish between different transcripts, is the level of pursued detail. Transcripts can be exceedingly meticulous, containing much additional non-verbal information such as:

- the tone of voice of the speaker(s) (e.g. harsh, kindly, encouraging);
- the inflection of the voice (e.g. rising or falling, a question or a statement, a cadence or a pause, a summarizing or exploratory tone, opening or closing a line of inquiry);
- emphases placed by the speaker;
- pauses (short to long) and silences (short to long);
- interruptions;

- the mood of the speaker(s) (e.g. excited, angry, resigned, bored, enthusiastic, committed, happy, grudging). (Cohen et al. 282)

However, adopting such non-verbal information requires some personal interpretation from the transcriber. Consider for example the concept of "tone of voice", which is at best difficult to standardize. Researchers will therefore have to apply some definition of (for example) a "harsh tone" that may or may not be shared by other researchers and readers. It is these sorts of problems that have led some to argue that transcribers "co-author" meaning in transcriptions (Cohen et al. 282; Polkinghorne 366), especially when this non-verbal information is included.

In some cases, punctuation itself has become a topic of such discussions. Magnusson and Marecek cite arguments that "adding punctuation during transcription imposes the transcriber's meaning making onto the participant's talk" (74; see also Seidman 116). Punctuation also has its place as part of a broader practice of slightly tweaking a transcript to turn it into a more "literary style" as this "may highlight nuances of a statement and facilitate communication of the meaning of the subject's stories to readers" (Kvale 98). One example of this practice is the removal of overlapping speech (Bucholtz 795). However, whereas most researchers seem to accept the use of punctuation, more significant edits to transcripts are contentious, though not rare. Bucholtz writes how such editing is: "a very common practice among discourse analysts of all kinds in order to make their texts more reader-friendly by eliminating unnecessary clutter" (795). Others are firmly opposed to any alterations at all, affirming that "it is not the purpose of transcription to produce a corrected version of what people have said, but rather an accurate one" (King and Horrocks 148).

Making decisions about the type of transcript one pursues then becomes a balancing act between several facets including: the level of detail required for the information to be useful, the readability of the transcript, and the time commitment required to do the transcriptions, while also keeping in mind the extent to which transcribers are adding meaning to the transcripts. For my research project, I chose to focus on slightly polished, mostly verbatim transcripts that do not contain much non-verbal information. There were three core factors that determined this choice: the purpose of the transcripts within my broader project, the time investment involved in highly detailed transcriptions, and attempts to limit the impact of transcriber-interpretation.

For my purposes, *what* people said carried more weight than exactly *how* they said it. Therefore, the exact inflection of a word, or other non-verbal information was of less concern, while it was important to accurately record participants' experiences and ideas. Additionally, I supplemented the analysis of the transcripts with moments where I went

back to the recordings themselves to observe specific non-verbal aspects that I then included in my analysis (e.g. in the new materialist analysis in section 3.3.). The added benefit of omitting non-verbal information was that it also decreased the time-investment required to process all the audio-recordings. That being said, the number of interviews was too large to be handled by one researcher within a reasonable timespan. King and Horrocks consider 20 or more interviews for one project a "relatively large" amount (143). My data consisted of 50+ hours of recorded audio from the interviews and focus groups combined. Researcher burn-out on such projects is a legitimate concern, as transcription can be a "time-consuming" (Seidman 115; Darlington and Scott 143; Cohen et Al. 281), "arduous" (Magnusson and Marecek 73) and "tiresome and stressing job" (Kvale 95). Seidman warns that: "[i]nterviewers who transcribe their own tapes come to know their interviews better, but the work is so demanding that they can easily tire and lose enthusiasm for interviewing as a research process" (115).

Guides to qualitative research can differ in their estimates of how long a researcher needs to transcribe an hour of audio, though three to eight hours are common estimates (King and Horrocks 143; Magnusson and Marecek 74). In more extreme cases, intensely detailed transcription can take multiple hours for a single minute of audio (King and Horrocks 143). In short, it was unfeasible for one researcher to do all transcription work. Thus, a small team of interns and students aided me in transcribing all the interview recordings. Spreading the workload over a team of multiple transcribers made the data processing manageable. Kvale emphasizes the importance of standardized transcripts in circumstances where transcription work is spread over multiple people. Otherwise, "it will be difficult to make [...] cross-comparisons among the interviews" (95). Thus, a "transcription guide" was developed which was the basis for all transcription work done by members of the research team.

The full guide has been added to appendix 11, and can be consulted there. I will briefly discuss two important aspects:

- Editing: we cleaned up the transcript in minor ways. The aim was to increase legibility while taking care to avoid changing the core message of the participant's speech. Edits included the deletion of repeated words, not interrupting the participant's sentences by marking every "uhu" uttered by the interviewer, and standardizing speech. In this sense we applied superficial tweaks towards the slightly more literary style that Kvale had argued clarified nuance and facilitated the communication of ideas (98).

- Non-verbal information: laughter was common, and some authors emphasize its importance during qualitative interviews (Seidman 90). We also added context if it

was necessary to understand the verbatim information (e.g. when someone disturbs the conversation, when there were technical difficulties, etc).

As a closing remark, I want to reflect on one comment made by Kvale: "the question 'What is the correct valid transcription?' cannot be answered – there is no true, objective transformation from the oral to the written mode. A more constructive question is 'What is a useful transcription for my research purposes?'" (98). The parameters of transcription we ultimately devised for this research project were the end-result of a complex consideration of practical and theoretical questions about the level of detail, time investment and type of information that was most important for gaining insight into the research questions we had set out to answer. In total, the interview-transcripts amounted to 420.000 words and were fully in Dutch. I provide English translations for the participant quotes that I use in this thesis, but the transcripts have not been translated in their entirety.

## 2.4 Data analysis

It is a recognized struggle in qualitative research that doing this sort of work often entails processing large volumes of data. Robert Weiss remarks that when doing any sort of interview-based work, analysing the data:

> can be daunting. There is likely to be a great deal of it, and no obvious place to start. Researchers may read through a few transcripts and feel excited by what is there, yet wonder how they can ever extract the essential message of those few transcripts, let alone the entire set. (48)

These days, several software packages exist to support qualitive researchers with their work, such as NVivo and Atlas.ti. For my research project, I used NVivo to both organize the transcript data and to spot interesting dynamics within that data. The next section summarizes NVivo's core feature: "coding", and explains the coding tree I developed and used for data analysis.

### 2.4.1 NVivo

The chief functionality of NVivo is that it allows the creation of a number of "codes" that can be added to text in a process called "coding." In NVivo, a "code" is a theme or topic the researcher identifies in their data. Within one research project, a researcher can use various kinds of codes, ranging from those that are "purely descriptive (this event occurred in the *playground*) to more conceptual topics or themes (this is about *violence between children*) to more interpretive or analytical concepts (this is a reflection of *cultural stereotyping*)" (Bazeley and Jackson 67; Emphasis in original). A distinction can be made between "a priori, or theoretically derived, codes" and "in vivo, or indigenous codes" (Bazeley and Jackson 73). The former are codes that a researcher establishes before the

data analysis takes place, often grounded in "prior reading and theoretical understanding" (Bazeley and Jackson 73). The latter are codes that emerge during the data analysis process. For the purposes of the analysis itself, the difference between these codes does not matter much. The significance mainly lies in whether or not a researcher had determined a code to be important in advance, or whether a code emerged organically through the data.

Within NVivo, codes are organized in a "coding tree." This tree hierarchically arranges codes in a system of parent-codes and child-codes. The higher-level parent-codes tend to represent more abstract or broader themes and topics, while lower-level child-codes tend to be more concrete or precise. For example, in one small part of my coding tree, I collected references to characters under the following coding structure:

- Reader-book
  - Characters
    - Aging
    - Book
      - Iep!
        - Bor
        - Redder
        - Loetje
        - …
      - My Name is Mina
      - Voor altijd samen, amen

Using such a coding tree, the researcher then proceeds to work through the data while attaching codes to words, sentences and paragraphs. NVivo then allows the researcher to – for example – click on "Bor" to review all relevant references that have been attached to that code. Furthermore, NVivo includes various tools to compare codes with one another and to visualize relationships; thus helping the researcher identify interesting dynamics. One example is the "cluster analysis" tool, which outputs a diagram that identifies patterns in codes or interviews based on parameters set by the researcher. For instance, the researcher can ask NVivo to group together interviews that were coded in similar ways using a tree structure.
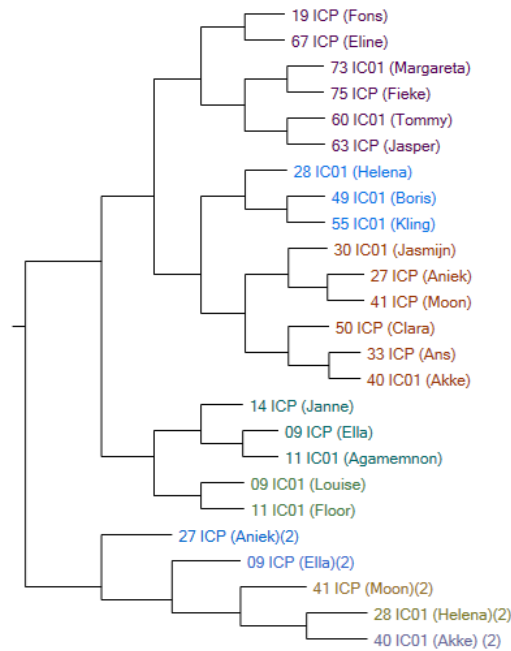
*Figure 1: interviews clustered by coding similarity in NVivo*

To focus on one part of this example, we can see that NVivo groups Ella (9) and Agamemnon (11) together, who are part of a bigger group of young participants including Louise (9), Floor (11) and Janne (14). In my own analyses, I used these kinds of tools as an initial step to identify patterns that I then manually explored further by using the coding tree.

Early in the research process, I structured my NVivo coding tree along three core branches that mirror the three major categories of research questions that I developed: those that focus mostly on the reader; those that focus on the reader's interaction with the book; and those that emphasize entanglement and intergenerational contact. I then populated this coding tree with a number of a priori codes. These had been drawn from discussions from fields such as age studies and children's literature research that I outlined in the theoretical framework. This included codes like "age norms", "meta-reflections" and "decline-narratives." Over the course of the data gathering period (2020-2022), this tree slowly expanded with indigenous codes that I discovered within the data. Some of these were more abstract theoretical topics that I had not initially realized would become so important (e.g. "aetonormativity"), while others were more concrete observations that needed to be included in the coding tree, such as readers' regular references to innocence and wisdom as age norms. On the next page, I include a simplified version of the final NVivo coding tree at the end of this project. The complete tree consisted of 250+ codes

and has been included in full in appendix 12. I conducted the various analyses that I present in Chapter Three using this coding tree.

- **Reader**
  - Age Norms
    - + Gender
    - Adultness
    - Childishness
    - Decline Narrative
    - Deficit Model
    - Developmentalist View
    - Disengagement Theory
    - Emotions
    - Family & Belonging
    - Fantasy & Play
    - Innocence & Experience
    - Kinship & Difference
    - Marriage & Relationships
    - Power
    - Routine
    - Second Childhoods + Infantilization
    - Third And Fourth Age
    - Wisdom
  - COVID-19
  - Meta-Reflections
    - Perceived Differences
  - Own experiences (Views On Age & LC)
  - Thoughts On Own Age
    - Flashbacks
  - SC-Background & Ideological Beliefs
  - Reflections on Children's Lit
  - Post-Research
    - New Insights
    - Changed Perspectives
  - Changes
  - Reading Habits
  - Uncertainty

- **Reader-Book**
  - Assessment of Impact
    - Suitability
    - Impact on Interviewee
    - Lessons, Morals & Take-Aways
  - Characters
    - Aging
    - Appearance
    - Books
    - Favourite-Be-Identification
    - Future
    - Motivation
    - Verisimilitude
  - Illustrations
  - Mijn Naam Is Nina
    - (Dis)Likes About The Book
    - Extraordinary Activities
    - Form of The Book
    - Body
    - Memories & Past Events
    - Quantity of Memories
    - Reader Environment
  - Plot
  - Recognition
- **(Inter)Generational Interaction**
  - Empathy
    - Emotional Contagion
    - Perspective Taking
    - Sympathy
  - Fiction
    - Ambivalent
    - Different
    - Same
  - Focus Group
    - Agreement
  - Real Life
    - Different
    - Same
  - Understanding

*Table 2: a simplified overview of the NVivo coding tree at the end of the research project*

## 2.5 **The validity of my data gathering and analysis**

Having outlined the various steps I undertook to gather and analyse data, I want to briefly return to my original exploration of the validity and reliability of qualitative interview-based research, before closing this chapter of the thesis. In a nutshell, I do not claim that this research presents an objective, unbiased view on the interplay between readers' age and their assessment of age in literature for young readers. However, neither do I fully ascribe to Janesick's call to utterly forego notions of validity and reliability, and to embrace proud subjectivity (305). In fact, I have undertaken several steps to gather, analyse and present the data in a way that aims to increase its validity. To highlight this, I turn to R. Burke Johnson's aforementioned "Strategies Used to Promote Qualitive Research Validity" (283). Of the 11 potential strategies he lists, 7 are of particular relevance for my research project.

1) "Low inference descriptors: the use of description phrased very close to the participants' accounts and researchers' field notes. Verbatims (i.e., direct quotations) are a commonly used type of low inference descriptors."

Verbatim participant quotes are the most prevalent form of descriptor I use to refer to the data. While there are occasional paraphrases, the analyses include around 200 direct quotes from participants of all ages.

2) "Methods triangulation: The use of multiple research methods to study a phenomenon."

I support my arguments using data gathered through several methods: semi-structured interviews, focus group conversations and creative responses to the books (e.g. short stories).

3) "Theory triangulation: The use of multiple theories and perspectives to help interpret and explain the data."

To support my various readings of the data, I reflect back on age studies, children's literature criticism, new materialism, cognitive studies and reader-response research to explain the patterns and dynamics I note.

4) "Investigator feedback: The use of multiple investigators (i.e., multiple researchers) in collecting and interpreting the data."

While most of my findings are my own interpretations, section 3.6. is a collaboration between myself and Emma-Louise Silva. This collaboration extended to data gathering and data analysis. I also collaborated with Fransje Van Oosterwijck and Myrte Trioen, two interns on the CAFYR project who read through some of the transcripts and presented on their findings.

5) "Peer review: Discussion of the researcher's interpretations and conclusions with other people."

All analyses presented in this thesis have either been previously published as articles and underwent peer review, have been the subject of conference presentations, or have otherwise been reviewed and discussed by members of the CAFYR-team and external experts such as Allison Waller and Cathy Butler.

6) "Pattern matching: Predicting a series of results that form a 'pattern' and then determining the degree to which the actual results fit the predicted pattern."

In several chapters, I engage with the predictions or claims that are sometimes made in fields such as age studies or children's literature criticism, but that are left empirically untested. In section 3.4., for instance, I engage with Peter Hunt's suggestion that young readers are less aware of societal norms and will thus read against them (*Criticism* 11). In that sense my empirical data allows me to both support and criticize certain patterns and predictions found in the theoretical literature.

7) "Reflexivity: This involves self awareness and 'critical self-reflection' by the researcher on his or her potential biases and predispositions as these may affect the research process and conclusions."

Critical self-reflection has been a core part of chapter 2, and returns to various degrees in the different analyses in chapter 3.

At the same time, I also want to recognize that in conducting my analyses, I often had to navigate the "messiness" of empirical research. Qualitative scholars sometimes use that term to refer to the complex and sometimes even frustrating nature of qualitative data (a.o. Silver and Lewins 610; Spencer et al. 93). Perfect patterns are rare, and conducting analyses can sometimes mean reading between the lines of vague or contradictory statements. There are times in my later analyses where I acknowledge the contradictions in my data while still demonstrating that interesting conclusions can be found at the heart of these discrepancies.

## 2.6 Final thoughts on methodology

To conclude, this thesis discusses data from 51 participants between the ages of 9 and 79-years old across 3 books, and used a mix of data gathering tools: a set of 67 interviews, 4 focus groups, and various kinds of creative responses. The analyses I present in the next chapter are not intended to be generalized to the broader population. Not only was my sample not selected randomly, it was small and intended for engagement in depth, rather than to find generalizable claims. Instead, my goal throughout the next chapter is to present aspects of readers' meaning-making in ways that increase our insight into the complexities of our culture's view on fictional and real age. I hope that my analyses may

prove useful to highlight further avenues to pursue in extended qualitative and quantitative research.

Some of the analyses presented in chapter 3 aspire more towards traditional notions of objectivity from the social sciences, whereas others explicitly use subjectivity to explore the interplay between who does the researching, who is researched, and how the research process itself plays into the co-construction of meaning. My intent here was to approach research questions in the manner that reveals to us the most about them, rather than establish the superiority of any of these perspectives on qualitative methodology.

# Chapter 3  **Findings**

This chapter explores the results of my research project. To add structure and focus to the analyses and findings that I present here, I have grouped them together in three subsections:

3.1.   **Reader → book:** Here, I start from the vantage point of the reader to explore the interaction between reader and book. This section groups together a series of analyses focused on how readers bring certain mental structures and prior understandings to their encounter with literature. More specifically, I focus on the use of memory on the one hand (research question 2), and age norms such as imagination, fantasy, innocence and wisdom on the other (research question 1).

3.2.   **Book → reader:** In this section, I explore the extraordinary activities readers completed while reading *My Name Is Mina* (research question 3). The intent is to start *from* the literary experience and look *to* the readers.

3.3.   **Reader ←→ world:** In the third section, I emphasize the importance of entanglement. I highlight how readers' responses to literature, and even their participation in my research project itself, was entangled in a web of relationships that involved both human and non-human factors (research question 4).

It should be emphasized that these categories overlap. They are not intended to be read as representing the only ways in which literature, readers and the broader socio-cultural context interact. Instead, these are offered as a set of handholds for my analyses, i.e. ways for me to introduce order in the messy, complicated and very much interconnected qualitative data.

To a degree, the idea behind the separation of sections 3.1. and 3.2. borrows from discourse about "top-down" and "bottom-up" reading experiences found in cognitive narratology. For example, Ralf Schneider argued that "readers continually process, on various levels of complexity, information both from the text (bottom-up) and from memory storages (top-down)" ("Reception" 120). Thus, I could make the argument that section 3.1. discusses the top-down angle, whereas section 3.2. adopts a bottom-up approach. However, an important addition Schneider himself makes, is that while these can be identified as discrete categories as part of a theoretical academic discussion, a particular concrete moment in the reader's encounter with literature is difficult to ascribe to one category over another. Instead, "the interaction between reader and text appears, above all, as a dynamic process" in which there is "interaction of bottom-up and top-down processing in using inference and forming hypotheses, activating schemas, and

constructing categories" ("Construction" 608). This is why I largely consider the separation into the three above categories a useful but artificial one for purposes of structure.

In that regard, a better way to conceptualize these three themes can be found in recent scholarship which posits that we should think of the meaning-making process as "rhizomic rather than either 'top-down' or 'bottom-up'" (Fox and Alldred, "Research-assemblage" 402). The idea of a "rhizomic" network was coined by Deleuze and Guattari based on the shape of a subterranean plant stem (6). The key feature of such a network for the analysis I present here, is that a rhizomic model "allows for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data representation and interpretation" (Ahnert et al. 26). I propose to envision the three categories/themes in this chapter as three such non-hierarchical entry points. They each look at fundamentally the same data, but start from a different entry point that leads to a different perspective. Hence, each section foregrounds some aspects, while downplaying others. To some degree, it is a matter of pragmatically identifying what the most productive and relevant topic is to explore in a particular section and what is not. In other words, though I start from the vantage point of the reader in section 3.1., bottom-up information from the text is still present and shaping the reading experience. Likewise, the research-assemblages I explore in the final section on the reader's entanglement with a broader world are also significant for the earlier sections, though are not thematized up until the last section as I opt to begin my analyses by focusing on other topics.

# 3.1 Reader -> Book

In this section, I have selected two entry points into the data that start from the reader: their use of age norms and their reflections on their memories. These particular topics were chosen for a mix of reasons, ranging from their relevance for my research questions, their prevalence in the data, their significance for the broader academic discourse on age and children's literature, and also my own personal interest. I want to reiterate that although this section ostensibly adopts what could be described as a "top-down" perspective, in which I look at how readers bring pre-existing information and beliefs to their reading experience, I do so with an awareness of the artificial nature of the context in which readers discussed these topics. My research did not consist of observing readers in a "natural" context. The readers' comments I analyse below were prompted by interview-questions I constructed with the express purpose of eliciting thoughts on age, while readers were fully aware of their participation in a research project centred around that same topic. These are significant caveats to consider, and I thus am not claiming that these "top-down" observations are completely pre-existing embedded cognitive structures that are activated in regular everyday reading.

The first section (3.1.1.) explores readers' use of age norms to reflect on their own age and the age of characters in *Iep!,* and to a lesser extent, *Voor altijd samen, amen*. This discussion is split up in two subsections, one that focuses on innocence and wisdom, and one that explores fantasy and imagination. I will begin this section with a brief introduction on age norms. In the second section (3.1.2.), I explore how reading *My Name Is Mina* prompted readers of different ages to recall various memories, and crucially, how these memories (did not) contribute to feelings of empathy vis-à-vis *My Name Is Mina*'s main character: Mina.

## 3.1.1 Age Norms

The concept of age norms was briefly introduced in my initial overview of the research questions. I resume that theoretical introduction here. Age norms are "age-related social norms" which, like other social norms "prescribe or interdict particular actions and […] are acknowledged by the members of a social group" (Radl 758). They form a "network of expectations that is imbedded throughout the cultural fabric of adult life" and lie at the core of statements like "act your age" (Neugarten 711). In that sense, age norms underpin various "[c]ulturally defined identificatory displays" such as "clothing style, hair color, posture [and] social roles" (Laz 93), and constitute the abstract foundation from which statements like "he's too old to be working so hard" or "she's too young to wear that style of clothing" derive their authority (Neugarten et al. 711). These expectations and statements are then used "to assign people to age categories and to guide behavior" (Laz 93). In turn, we judge ourselves, and are judged by others, by "our ability to 'measure up'" to these age norms (Laz 104).

Scholarship about age and children's literature often includes assumptions or claims about how people deal with (age) norms in daily life and in literature. Hunt remarks how "[i]t is likely that child-readers, who are in the process of learning societal and literary norms, will read against societal norms, and be ready to misread or identify the blindnesses of the text" (*Criticism* 11). Meanwhile, others suggest that – as a consequence of the fragmentation/destandardization of the life course – the "increasingly blurred boundaries between age categories is accompanied by a relaxation of age norms" (Pickard 82). If we assume this to be true, then this creates the expectation that younger readers will be more likely to read "against" age norms, or that readers of all ages may recognize the existence of age norms without necessarily caring about meeting them. These are, however, assumptions, and due to the general scarcity of empirical reader-response research centred on children's literature, it is difficult to argue in favour of or against them. Furthermore, age norms are not experienced in a vacuum, and generalized assumptions about readers' reactions based purely on their age may not hold up to real world conditions. Even in a group of people "with similar ages and backgrounds, age norms may raise debate" (Joosen, "Introduction" 13).

Therefore, from the earliest stages of designing my research project, I was determined to look into age norms via the research question: "**Which age norms are validated/challenged by the participants in their responses to age in children's literature and is there a relation to the age of the reader?**" Age norms are so foundational to how age is given meaning that fairly general questions often sufficed to elicit them; questions such as "is character X an adult? Why (not)?" or "Do you think this character offers a believable portrayal of someone of your age?" or even "Do you still read children's books?"

In Cecilia Lindgren and Johanna Sjöberg's article on intergenerational interaction in *Mad Men*, they list several "age norms established within the series" (189), such as:

> children should not know about politics (S1E12), attend funerals (S3E5), watch upsetting news (S3E12; see also Batty 203), or do things that are "too dangerous," such as horseback riding (S2E1). Children should not wear women's boots or makeup (S5E7), and they should definitely not be smoking (S2E12) or exploring their sexuality (S4E5). Furthermore, grandparents are expected to respect these boundaries and, for instance, not let children know too much about war or death (S3E4) (189)

In their most concrete form, age norms can thus be phrased as a proscriptive statement, i.e. "children/adults/old people/teenagers *should* (not) be/do/want/think/wear/ X, Y or Z." That being said, the above examples are age norms that Lindgren and Sjöberg formulate themselves through their close readings of the show, and are only rarely explicitly stated by characters (198). Similarly, my interviewees only occasionally made concrete proscriptive statements, instead often inadvertently or purposefully alluding to age norms

that operated in the background of their assessments of themselves or characters of all ages.

If we look specifically at how literary characters are experienced by a reader, age norms are predominantly a component of what Schneider calls "social categorization" ("Construction" 619). This process is triggered through textual cues such as "noun phrases naming professions and social roles", or more generally, when a character's description matches a "social stereotype already available" ("Construction" 619). In other words, when a reader notices that a character is described as a grandmother, child, "boomer" or other age-related label, that actives a reader's "structures of knowledge" from which they will then draw to adopt "a certain disposition towards the character" ("Construction" 619-623). A process of "decategorization" can also take place, if a reader "encounters information that stands in direct opposition to the defining characteristics of the category" ("Construction" 623), for instance, when a child character acts in a way that is incompatible with how the reader constructs childhood. Categorization is an example of top-down processing, in which a reader uses pre-existing knowledge to grant meaning to a literary character. The alternative is a process Schneider calls "personalization", in which a reader uses information from the text to construct a mental model of a character, likely because they are "not able or willing to apply stored structures of knowledge" ("Construction" 624).

Readers used a wide array of age norms to make sense of their own age and the age of characters in the book they read for this research project. I have opted to focus on innocence and wisdom in the first part of this section, and fantasy and imagination in the second part. My choice to focus on these topics was spurred by their dominance in the data and the prevalence with which they are invoked in various academic discussions. Through my empirical data, I can explore claims such as "innocence is a faculty needed not at all by the child but very badly by the adult who put it there in the first place" (Kincaid 73) or "Imagination, [is] a key quality of childness" (Nikolajeva, "Neuroscience" 27). While there were several other age norms that readers relied on (e.g. the idea that adults should be married and start a family), none shared that same combination of academic insistence that they are important, and readers' broad systematic use of them, which led me to focus on these particular examples.

Direct, unambivalent statements like "children should be innocent" or "adults should not show too much imagination" were rare. Instead, instances of these age norms were often hidden behind surprised reflections on scenes where child characters demonstrate knowledge that is deemed unusual for their age; or come peeking behind the curtain of an older reader complaining about being laughed at for demonstrating imagination. The interview questions themselves did not purposefully steer towards innocence, wisdom, imagination or fantasy as topics for discussion. These emerged throughout the interviews

as common topics that participants spontaneously acknowledged to support all kinds of constructions of age.

My analyses will generally consist of three recurring discussions:

1) **How readers of a particular age construct their own or another age group**. (e.g. child readers and the perception of adult fantasy). In a way, this establishes some of the parameters of what Schneider referred to as the "category" that readers can then point to during the categorization process of a character.
2) **How readers of a particular age reflect on characters**. I point to particular readers' analyses of characters and explicit or implied comments about age to outline broader dynamics in the perception of the age of characters. These vary between references to broad categories on the one hand, and more personalized characters built on particular passages from the book on the other hand.
3) **Moments of interaction.** Using the focus group data, I explore how readers of different ages interacted, agreed and disagreed about various aspects of the construction of characters' ages and their own ages.

In this section of the thesis, I use combinations of the above three discussions to cover a series of themes (e.g. the "unknowing child"). Some sections will mix the three aspects equally, whereas others – for example – mostly focus on establishing how a particular group of readers construct an age category. Innocence and wisdom are grouped together in the first section, and fantasy and imagination in the second, because readers often used them in relation to one another. I will begin by exploring the socio-cultural context of these age norms in more detail.

### 3.1.1.1 *Innocence and wisdom[25]*
### 3.1.1.1.1 **Definitions**

This section will establish the groundwork for what "innocence" and "wisdom" mean for my later discussion. My exploration of these topics will go beyond strict definitions and will explore some of the social and historical variability of these concepts and how they are used in public discourse.

#### Innocence

Innocence is a common component of modern constructs of childhood, to the extent that some call it "the twenty-first century default view of childhood" (Reeves 37). Many point to the "Romantic Child" (Pickard 180; Natov 3) as one of the earliest constructs of childhood where innocence was foregrounded, though some critics argue it is a much older phenomenon (Reeves 41). Colin Heywood, for example, suggests that in post-medieval society, the view on childhood shifted as more and more people "came to recognize the innocence and weakness of childhood" (Epub). Throughout history there have also been several constructs of childhood where innocence was explicitly absent. The Christian church's concept of original sin suggests that we carry sin with us from birth. In *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), one of the most influential texts of Protestant theology, John Calvin writes that:

> infants bear their condemnation with them from their mother's womb; for, though they have not yet brought forth the fruits of their own iniquity, they have the seed enclosed within themselves. Indeed, their whole nature is a seed of sin; thus it cannot but be hateful and abominable to God. (Calvin 1311)

In such a paradigm, adults are the ones seen as possessing "enlightened piety", and the period of childhood was kept as short as possible. Children were not only constructed as not-innocent, childhood as a whole was not the celebrated, wholesome period of life it would later be envisioned as. This belief in the "child's innate depravity" was a common factor in the construction of childhood up until the early eighteenth century (Gubar, "Innocence" [1st edition] 122).

Since that time, several complex shifts in the social construction of childhood foregrounded childhood innocence, which consequently became – and remains – one of the most common components of Western culture's constructions of childhood (Lowe 270; Lorraine Green [1st edition] 76). Innocence is included as one of the *Keywords for Children's Literature,* where Gubar points out that "[i]nnocence is all about what you lack" ("Innocence" [1st edition] 121). Depending on the scholar, different deficits are ascribed to children that lead to them being labelled as innocent, but deficits in experience and knowledge are common (Nodelman 157; Reeves 52; Faulkner 127). Gubar herself points to the OED's definition of innocence as "freedom from sin, guilt, or moral wrong. . . freedom

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[25] Parts of this section were published in my article for IRCL (Duthoy, "Innocence").

from cunning or artifice" (qtd. in Gubar, "Innocence" [1st edition] 121). Crucially, that freedom from sin, guilt and other elements is not replaced by something else, instead innocence is "an empty trait, valued precisely as a deficit of experience" (Faulkner 127). By connecting innocence so strongly to childhood, the child itself becomes "equated with emptiness" (Gubar, "Innocence" [2nd edition] 106). Consequently, childhood innocence is also linked to a sense of purity (a.o. Egan and Hawkes 311; Gubar, "Innocence" [1st edition] 127), which is then contrasted with a "corrupted adult society" (Wilkie-Stibbs 358). Thus, innocence – generally speaking – is a state in which you lack knowledge and experience, and thus view the world and react to it from a supposedly "pure" and naïve state.

This tendency to describe children's innocence almost invariably in terms of what they are *not*, is part of a broader conceptualization of children that Gubar dubbed the "deficit model of childhood." Such a model relies on taking "deficiency as our primary metaphor when we think about what it means to be a child" ("Hermeneutics" 298). While this model is not the only lens through which children are perceived, it is widespread. As Clémentine Beauvais argues: "most adults perceive children as being in a state of lack; they see children as less than they might be" (*Time* 3). Some scholars have claimed they are "justifiably uncomfortable" with the deficit model of childhood because it grants children "essential characteristics that differentiate them decisively from adults", which neglects the fact that children are also a diverse group (Gubar, "Hermeneutics" 294).

Scholars have remarked that as much as certain adults point to childhood's inherent and essential innocence, it is in fact not a natural state for children, but is actively created and constantly upheld by the actions and desires of adults (Lorraine Green [2nd edition] 79-80). James Kincaid argued that "[i]nnocence is not [...] detected but granted, not nurtured but enforced; it comes at the child as a denial of a whole host of capacities, an emptying out" (73). In this process, adults take up "the role of gatekeeper [making] sure that the door to the adult world is kept shut, and the borders of innocent childhood upheld" (Lindgren and Sjöberg 195). One reason scholars cite for adults' nurturing of childhood innocence is that this grants adults power over children. Nodelman remarks how adult treatment of children "encourages them to perceive themselves as innocent enough to require and accept adult power over themselves" (Nodelman 53; see also Nikolajeva, *Power* 22). Other arguments cite a desire to protect children, often built on the argument that childhood innocence needs to be enforced because certain knowledge is hazardous to young children (Egan and Hawkes 307). In other words, even though children have lived less long, children's deficits are not necessarily biological fact, but rather enforced by adults for various reasons.

As such, children's innocence has also been characterized as a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. If we believe that being a child fundamentally entails not having knowledge, then that may lead us to *actively* "deny children access to knowledge and power", which results in a double standard: "a child is ignorant if she doesn't know what adults want her to know, but innocent if she doesn't know what adults don't want her to know" (Kitzinger

165). Thus, by limiting the knowledge and experience children are granted access to, some propose that we are "bringing into being the condition [we claim] only to describe" (Gubar, "Hermeneutics" 298; see also Reeves 40).

One area in which innocence becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy is sexuality, with the emphasis often resting on the innocence of young girls. Egan and Hawkes criticize the view that any sort of sexual imagery or information is "destructive of 'innocence', that assumed-with-age quality. A slippery slope, eroded girlhood innocence is especially vulnerable and thus susceptible to shift from purity to 'slutty' with exposure to sexualising materials" (311). This is why the concept of innocence itself has been called "a double-edged sword" in the fight against child sexual abuse (Lorraine Green [1st edition] 74). While the idea of children's loss of innocence through abuse drives adults towards enacting measures that aim to protect children, those same measures also "justify […] depriving children of any potentially protective sexual education" (Lorraine Green [1st edition] 74; see also Egan and Hawkes 308). In addition, some argue that emphasizing children's innocence and purity in fact fuels the fires of sexual abuse. If children exist in this "empty state, they present themselves as candidates for being filled with, among other things, desire. The asexual child is not […] less erotic but rather more" (Kincaid 175).

Deficit model constructs of innocence may also lead to problematic responses from adults when young people – perhaps through forces out of their control – are no longer deemed innocent and "lose" access to childhood. For instance, those who are perceived as having knowledge and experience beyond their years. As Faulkner points out:

> while compliance to the innocence ideal is demanding for middle-class children, it is especially onerous—and sometimes impossible—for children whose everyday lives least approximate a picture of innocence. Children in poverty, abused children, refugee and indigenous children, and, at the extreme, child soldiers are variously ignored, vilified, and demonized. (128)

Finally, while the above sections have summarized some of the criticisms that have been levelled at unnuanced belief in childhood innocence, I would be remiss to ignore some of the very real positive consequences that widespread adoption of a belief in childhood innocence has also brought with it. While it is true that constructing children as pure, vulnerable creatures whose innocence needs to be maintained at all costs leads adults to deny "their capacity as active agents" (Reeves 40), that same perception of childhood was also invoked by critics in the nineteenth century to oppose "the unremitting debasement of children through long hours, unhealthy conditions, corporal punishment and sexual harassment (of girls)" (Hendrick 38). And as Robichaud et al. remark, even today, the construction of childhood "as an age of innocence, vulnerability, and dependency, […] entitles one-quarter of the world's population […] to unique consideration, care, and supports" (Robichaud et al. 3). There is a reason why Lorraine Green – when conceptualizing childhood – ponders whether we are "referring to the mythical walled

Garden of Eden or the prison of childhood?" ([2$^{nd}$ edition] 79). The construction of children as weak, pure, innocent and powerless creatures has called many an adult into action to defend them, which has improved the lives of many children. But by maintaining that view as children's normal and ideal state, we enforce these very same aspects on children, potentially denying them room for agency and growth.

## Wisdom

Innocence as an abstract concept – and its constituent elements such as those identified by Nodelman and others (inexperience, lack of knowledge,…) – are interesting to consider in the context of childhood, but even more can be gained by locating these reflections in a broader dialogue between childhood and adulthood. Age is a relational quality – i.e. the qualities we ascribe to one age group, are not given meaning independently, but exist in an oppositional relationship with the qualities we ascribe to other age groups: "young is not old […] each derives their meaning from contrast with the other" (Pickard 176). This is especially true when we compare childhood to adulthood. Childhood and adulthood are "[i]nextricably tied up in binary habits of thinking" in which the childlike "can be constructed and understood only in relation to that which it is not—the nonchildlike or, more directly, the adult" (Nodelman 206; see also Lorraine Green [2$^{nd}$ edition] 79).

Thus, while we find "innocence and ignorance" ascribed to youth, "knowledge and wisdom" is its oppositional and complementary quality. Elisabeth Wesseling explores intergenerational dynamics in Hector Malot's *Sans famille*. While focusing on young Rémi and old Vitalis, she writes:

> "Complementarity" characterizes the relationship between Vitalis and Rémi, who are very different from each other yet manage to establish a loyal and loving relationship that benefits both. Rémi embodies youthful innocence and ignorance, while Vitalis possesses the knowledge and wisdom that come with age. (66)

This entangled and complementary nature of childhood innocence and (old) adult wisdom is expressed by a number of authors (e.g. Natov 4). Explorations of this complementarity also often invoke terms like "experience" and "knowledge" (e.g. William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*). On the one hand, Beauvais points out the "often-heard claims that […] that adults are 'experienced', 'wise' or 'knowledgeable' (*Time* 6). On the other hand, Nodelman remarks that children are perceived as "inexperienced" and "know[ing] less" (157).

Like innocence, "wisdom" is "a complex concept to define, operationalize and measure" (Lorraine Green [1$^{st}$ edition] 183). It is an abstract quality that encompasses a variety of sub traits, such as 'insight' and 'judgement'. As with innocence, reflections on the origin of wisdom often emphasize the importance of age. Granville Stanley Hall wrote that one of the pleasures of being old was that it brought him "a real wisdom that only age can teach" (366). Kathleen Woodward's definition similarly stresses the age component: wisdom is "a

capacity for balanced reflection and judgment that can only accrue with long experience" (Woodward, "Wisdom" 187). Overall also emphasizes age, but adds some nuance. She begins by positing that "[p]erhaps here, if anywhere, in this decades-long life perspective, is where the supposed and much-vaunted wisdom of old age may be found" (90). However, she adds that "wisdom is not inevitable" and not even "very common. We don't necessarily gain much insight as we get older" (90).

Much like innocence, wisdom's use as an age norm has also been criticized. Connecting wisdom to old age might appear as positive, yet has potential for ageist implications. Woodward suggests that because wisdom often relates to detachment, it "justifies the disengagement theory of aging, the theory that older people 'naturally' withdraw from their social roles so as to make their ultimate disappearance-death-less [sic] difficult for the smooth functioning of society" ("Wisdom" 206). In making this argument, Woodward draws from assessments of old age such as those made by Erik Erikson, who envisioned wisdom as the strength that matures within someone specifically through their nearing encounter with death. Erikson consequently defined wisdom as "detached concern with life itself, in the face of death itself" (Epub). This belief in the entanglement of wisdom and detachment leads to stereotypes such as the "wise old mentor", which are regularly found in children's literature (Joosen, *Adulthood* 12; 201). However, other scholars profess how, instead of leading to older people detaching from society, the belief in old-age wisdom can also contribute to intergenerational engagement/interaction: "The contribution of older people as a 'strong social model' for other generations reflects the idea of the 'social grandparent' […] where older people, when given the opportunity, can contribute their skills and life wisdom to younger generations including very young children" (Gallagher 29). Similarly, some empirical research suggests that "wisdom is positively and significantly related to late life SWB [= subjective well-being] even after controlling for present life conditions and demographics" (Ardelt and Edwards 511). In other words, people feel better about themselves if they consider themselves wise.

Furthermore, while the direct ascription of wisdom to old age is indeed a common perspective, children have also been deemed wise at times. The view that children are "creatures of deeper wisdom", for instance, was prominent among eighteenth-century Romantics (Heywood). For Wordsworth and Blake, the process of growing into adulthood entailed losing the child's perspective and outlook on the world. Blake saw innocence and wisdom therefore as "natural partners", and believed that a particular kind of wisdom could also be found in children's "state of higher Innocence" (Natov 12). Blake believed that this form of wisdom is lost as we grow into adulthood. Meanwhile, Wordsworth, as Natov writes, "laments but also affirms the struggle of the adult to recover the early instinctual knowledge, the inarticulate but deep feeling of childhood" (27). As part of that struggle, intergenerational interaction can assist the adult trying to recapture a child's perspective:

> The child becomes the teacher: the adult learns to listen to the child-speaker and to the outside world, rather than to his own inner preoccupations or conventional responses, in order to eventually retrieve significant lessons originally embedded in childhood. (Natov 21)

In short, the Romantics offered the view that there is a sense of natural wisdom to be found in childhood innocence, an uncorrupted, pure way of looking at the world that is lost in adulthood. Adults may carry their own forms of wisdom grounded in experience and knowledge, but simultaneously lose the unique perspective children have. Thus, two different forms of wisdom emerge, one that can be found in the uncorrupted and pure child and one that can be found in the knowledgeable and experienced adult. While this way of thinking about childhood wisdom/innocence was foregrounded by the Romantics, we can still find modern outlooks on children that echo similar sentiments. Hunt, for instance, makes a number of claims about children, including that: "[t]hey are less bound by fixed schemas, and in this sense see more clearly" (*Criticism* 57).

These ebbs and flows in historical perspectives on who is wise and who is innocent illustrate Beauvais' comment about the "cohabitation" of age norms (*Time* 70). Some people still firmly believe in Romantic ideas about children who are simultaneously wise, uncorrupted and innocent, while others adopt different outlooks. This is a continuously evolving cultural discourse that shifts and changes in response to how cultural products such as children's literature construct children and (older) adults. For TV, Lindgren and Sjöberg argue that nowadays "a 'knowing child' is portrayed more and more frequently—a child who understands more about the adult world than the notion of the innocent child would allow [...]. [R]igid divisions between knowledge and innocence, and between adulthood and childhood, are destabilized" (187). Innocence and wisdom are thus highly evocative age norms that can be configured and reconfigured in a number of ways. People of various ages can be wise, innocent or both at the same time.

In the next section, I explore how readers of all ages used these age norms in their reflections on their own age and the construction of age in *Iep!.* I have organized this discussion mostly by the age of the reader, starting with the younger readers. This allows me to contextualize the discussion in a broader trend of how perspectives change with age. There are times however, where I do cut across age groups to make broader, comparative points. Before turning to the data itself, I want to establish that the goal of my discussion is not to judge the accurateness of my participants' applications of "wisdom" and "innocence" in relation to any definition. "Innocence" and "wisdom" are instead used as labels to aggregate and compare related reflections made by my participants, regarding their own age and the age of characters. This includes reflections that discuss concepts such as "knowledge", "experience", "naivety" and so on, concepts that inherently relate and constitute important subsets of "innocence" and "wisdom" even if the latter are not literally invoked, or if the participants use these terms in unexpected or unusual ways.

### 3.1.1.1.2 **Young readers**

The Unknowing Child

In 2012, Rosemarie Lowe conducted empirical research with child participants aged 3-4 in a day-care nursery in England's West Midlands. Her goal was to gain insight in the various ways in which children construct childhood. Lowe's results outline four images of childhood with which children engage: the Playful Child, the Needful Child, the Unauthorised Child and – most importantly for this chapter of my thesis – the Unknowing Child. The latter encapsulates the child participants' view that "adults have knowledge and, in relation to this, children are unknowing" (275). Lowe found that among the children she observed, their own lack of knowledge was understood as explicitly relational to adults: "there is an apparent need or desire to move towards adult knowledge; illustrative of the child as a 'non-adult' in dominant Western discourses of childhood" (275). Among other things, a lack of knowledge contributes to narratives of innocence that propagate the "idea that children need protection from danger and threats, physical, biological and intellectual" (270). In other words, adhering to childhood innocence can result in the belief that children lack the necessary knowledge (derived from experience) with which to safely navigate the world. At the same time, Lowe also found that while children see themselves as knowing less than adults, they can become frustrated if this leads adults to restrict their freedom. They: "showed frustration and dissatisfaction when they demonstrated an ability to solve problems, complete tasks or knew what to do next, and this was quashed by the social rules of the situation" (Lowe 276).

A similar idea of innocence appeared during my interviews with the youngest participants: Louise (9), Ella (9), David (10), Agamemnon (11), Floor (11) and Katrijn (13). While these readers did not use the literal Dutch words for "innocence" and "wisdom", they actively engaged with these concepts through reflections on (adult assumptions of) children's knowledge. Furthermore, some patterns emerge among this broader group of young readers that can be ascribed to age. The youngest participants, Louise (9) and Ella (9), tended to describe themselves and younger people in general as unknowing, and less capable of understanding and processing information. When commenting on a scene from *Iep!* where the protagonists encounter a character doing acrobatics on a roof, Louise (9) felt that this character was behaving inappropriately for his age: "It looked dangerous and he was too young I thought. Much too young to do such a thing."[26] She added that this behaviour is more suitable for older people. Later, when she identified a moral to the story, I asked whether that moral was also important for adults, to which she replied: "I think adults will already know. Maybe some of them won't, but that will be very few people."[27] I had a similar conversation with Ella (9), who added that adults were better at

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[26] Original text: "Omdat dat redelijk gevaarlijk lijkt vooral en hij was ook nog jong vond ik. Veel te jong om zoiets te doen."

[27] Original text: "[I]k denk dat […] volwassenen dat wel weten. Nu misschien sommigen [niet] maar dat zou toch heel weinig mensen zijn."

gathering meaning from the books they read: "Yeah, adults will probably find something in this text that I did not notice."[28] David (10) felt that *Voor altijd samen, amen* was a good book for children because "it teaches you tons of things."[29] When I asked him whether the book could teach adults anything, he replied: "they will already know most things. And if you've read plenty of books [...] you're going to be like 'this book right here is full of things I already know. I'm going to put it aside.'"[30] In these interpretations by the 9 and 10-year-old participants, there is a shared belief in children's lack of knowledge compared to adults, and in the case of Ella, a belief in her own reduced ability to process all information presented in the story.

There are hints of Lowe's "unknowing child" behind these readers' reflections on themselves and other young readers. The point is not, however, that Louise, Ella and David feel that they do not know *anything*, but rather that they construct adults as having comparatively more knowledge. Through this perspective, children's literature is then seen as having little educational value for adults, who already know most things. This reasoning is in part grounded in a deficit model of age. The young participants construct themselves in relation to adults through a deficit in knowledge, and the literature that is written for them in part is intended to fill that deficit.

## Adding nuance and complexity

However, there are other dynamics at play that further complicate this initial assessment. David (10), for instance, does not treat all adults and their knowledge equally. In our discussion on *Voor altijd samen, amen*, I asked David what he thought about Polleke's grandparents. He first remarked that the grandfather was one of his favourite characters. When I asked him why, he offered a broader reflection on older people:

> I actually find old people to be interesting because older people, if they were lucky, lived through the war and I'm interested in world wars and stuff. So you can maybe ask them stuff sometimes.[31]

Thus, the value David ascribes to older people's knowledge is not born from a general recognition of their sage wisdom, but is somewhat rooted in utilitarian convenience. Not all old people are interesting for David, only those who happen to have access to the particular knowledge he seeks. At the same time, he also shared an awareness of older people lacking knowledge in other areas. When we discussed Polleke's grandmother, he

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[28] Original text: "[V]olwassenen gaan er waarschijnlijk nog iets anders uithalen dat mij niet is opgevallen."
[29] Original text: "Je leert er ook van alles van."
[30] Original text: "[D]an ga je de meeste dingen al wel weten. En als je er zo al veel hebt gelezen [...] dan ga je zeggen van 'dat boek dat zit hier vol dingen dat ik eigenlijk al weet. Ik ga het eigenlijk aan de kant leggen.'"
[31] Original text: "Ik vind eigenlijk oudere mensen interessant omdat de oudere mensen hebben misschien met heel veel geluk de oorlog meegemaakt en ik ben geïnteresseerd in wereldoorlogen en zo. Dus je kunt daar misschien eens iets aan vragen."

commented that she was "you know, a typical granny, yeah."[32] I asked him to elaborate on what constitutes a "typical granny", to which he replied:

> Not following the technological age. Like when a new iPhone releases they say like "what is that, an iPhone?" Or when they order a computer that they say "what is that a competutor [sic]?" Because my grandma said that one time. A competutor [sic]. I told her "it is a *computer*" and she said yes. So they don't understand the internet-age.[33]

There is a slight mocking undertone to sharing his grandmother's mispronunciation of computer, grounded in an implied message that he himself understands these topics just fine. Furthermore, David's distinction between the grandmother and grandfather does not seem to be random. His comments about her being a "typical granny" incorporate aspects of the "ineffectual crone" stereotype in which older women are constructed as "passive or demented" (Henneberg, "Nexus" 129).

Thus, in David's case, a number of different perspectives exist simultaneously. There is a belief that adults in general have little use for children's literature, because they already know whatever it is the book is trying to impart on its reader. At the same time, David cherishes older adults that can provide information on the specific topics he is interested in, while also gently mocking "typical grannies" who are not able to match his own knowledge. Ultimately, David both adheres to, and subverts, the unknowing child paradigm. Some older adults (and especially men) are constructed as sources of information, useful to grant him access to adult knowledge, while those he surpasses in knowledge are slightly ridiculed.

I identified a related dynamic in my discussions with Agamemnon (11) and Katrijn (13). When I asked Agamemnon what he liked about being his age, he immediately brought up the unknowing child stereotype as a positive aspect, even revelling slightly in it because it offered him a sense of freedom from responsibility: "You have a lot of excuses that you don't know things yet if you do something wrong. When you're thirteen you should know, but ten – eleven? Yeah, we're allowed to do much more."[34] He thus experiences what he perceives as adult sentiment regarding children as empowering. Note that he does not actually claim he has significant gaps in his knowledge, only that he is perceived as such, which he then sees as a useful excuse for when he is caught doing something "wrong." Agamemnon's (11) explicit reference of 13-year-olds and their perceived knowledge is

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[32] Original text: "Zo een typisch omaatje hé. Ja."

[33] Original text: "Niet mee zijn met de technologische tijd. Dus als er zo een nieuwe iPhone uit is dat ze gaat zeggen "Wat is dat een iPhone?" Of als ze een computer bestellen dat ze zeggen "wat is dat een competuter." Want mijn oma heeft dat ook een keer gezegd. Een competuter. Ik zeg het is een computer. En ze zei ja. Dus dat ze niet mee zijn met de internettijd."

[34] Original text: "Je hebt nog veel excuses van je weet het nog niet. Als je zoiets fout hebt gedaan of zo? Als je zo 13 zijt dan hoop ik dat je toch al weet dingen. Maar zo 11-10 zo, dat is nog ja. Dan mag je nog veel."

particularly salient considering Katrijn's (13) interview. She perceived her own age group much in the same way as Agamemnon saw his own, including the same benefits of being perceived as unknowing: "you're allowed to just do stuff and it's not that bad if anything goes wrong […] you know if you get bad grades on an exam or something adults will tell you that it's a learning experience."[35] Like Agamemnon, Katrijn feels shielded from the worst consequences of her failures because she believes adults think she still has a lot left to learn.

Beauvais writes on the topic of children's literature and its audience that "knowledge is often equated with age and experience […] confirming the paradigmatic view that knowledge is age-related, and that age is power" (*Time* 86). A pedagogic/didactic relationship is an inherent part of the realization of this power (*Time* 45-46). While this relationship is often perceived as rooted in adult dominance over the child, Agamemnon and Katrijn find ways to circumvent this dynamic, empowering themselves instead. They both show an awareness that they are perceived as "not adult" – and by extension – as "not knowing any better." This particular sense of empowerment Agamemnon and Katrijn experience can be read as a partial subversion of deficit model thinking. If children are perceived as not knowing any better, i.e. as "deficit becomings" (Lorraine Green [1st edition] 72), then they should not be held to the same standards of behaviour as adults. Therefore, children's negative actions do not hold much weight and instead become learning experiences.

Scholarly work on the social dimension of ageing often borrows from discourse pioneered by gender critics, or more specifically, critics who write about the experience and social construction of women. Pickard points out that: "key feminists […] Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Eva Figes and latterly Lynn Segal, among others, all turned their attention to later life, seeing many similarities between the experience of being female and being old" (47; see also Laz 96; Gullette 31). As a result, a number of concepts traditionally used in feminist criticism, have been expanded and applied to discussions about age in compelling ways. It is in this context that I want to briefly explore "the feminine masquerade", which refers to the act of presenting oneself according to dominant female stereotypes, potentially in order to hide other ways in which one subverts them. It is thus:

> a gender performance akin to wearing a "masque" that is intended to distract patriarchal society from the fact that certain […] women are subverting traditional gender expectations [...]. This may serve to reassure both the woman herself that despite her achievements/capacity/ intelligence she remains "feminine" enough to

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[35] Original text: "[J]e mag nog wel gewoon wat doen en als er dan iets mis gaat dan is dat nog niet zo heel erg. […] [A]ls je echt eens een echt slecht examen hebt dan zeggen ze: 'ge kunt daar uit leren.'"

attract the admiration of men, and to reassure men that she presents no "threat."
(Pickard 54)

The feminine masquerade relates to the performativity of gender, but can also be expanded to think about the performativity of age. "Performing age" means that we "enact […] certain age roles rather than merely being a given age" (Joosen, "Introduction" 11). That enactment can have specific social purposes. Woodward describes how some women may despise "the performance of femininity as fatuous and superficial." She offers the example of Carolyn Heilbrun, for whom "grandmother" was a "part she chose for herself." Heilbrun "aged herself" by purposefully adopting the cultural trappings of old age, with the explicit intent "to play the central stereotypical part that our culture has chosen for older women", and thus welcoming "intentional desexualization and disappearance as a woman into old age" (Woodward, "Performing" 287-288).

Such discussions are also relevant for contextualizing younger people's experiences. Children who are unable to perform childhood according to dominant perspectives similarly run the risk of being ostracized (Faulkner 128). Just as women in the workplace need to perform ditzy femininity to assure men that they are no threat (Pickard 54; McRobbie 725), children may find the need to "perform childhood" as to not upset adults. Agamemnon and Katrijn, for instance, show some awareness of how children of their age are supposed to be: lacking in knowledge and in the midst of a learning process. Broadly speaking, Katrijn and Agamemnon illustrate a point Nodelman made in *The Hidden Adult*: "[f]inding cause to celebrate the joys of childlike innocence invites child readers to celebrate their own innocence and […] to imagine themselves to be (or, perhaps more exactly, to pretend to imagine themselves to be) innocent in order to please adults" (197). Katrijn and Agamemnon perform their own age as more innocent and more lacking in knowledge than they feel they are, in response to an awareness of how adults wish or expect them to be. Ultimately, this performance comes with certain perks as well, most notably the lack of significant consequences for their actions. Laz points out the practicality of conforming to age norms:

> the norms associated with gender or age roles are not necessarily internalized, nor must they be internalized in order for someone to act in accordance with them. There may be other compelling reasons (economic incentives, informal group pressure, formal sanctions) for individual conformity to norms in the absence of their internalization. (95)

Moreover, Agamemnon also applied ideas about knowledge in his assessment of characters' ages. He estimated that Loetje is roughly ten years old, after which I asked him whether he could identify anything about Loetje that he would normally link to an older or younger person. He replied: "I think that younger children are a bit more curious, because they have so much left to learn. And that's why I think Loetje acts younger [than ten]

sometimes."[36] In other words, while he believes Loetje to be ten years old, Agamemnon struggled with connecting her perceived curiosity to that age, noting a discrepancy between her actual age and her performance of age. Agamemnon's analysis illustrates a particular tension. By linking curiosity explicitly not just to "younger" children, but specifically those younger than ten, Agamemnon again insinuates that as an eleven-year-old, he considers himself comparatively more knowledgeable.

Floor's (11) interview contained a similar underlying tension. Floor consistently used the perceived quantity (and quality) of knowledge possessed by characters as a parameter to age them. This notably emerged in her view on the age of three characters: Bor, Loetje and an unnamed boy living in a psychiatric hospital. Floor believed the unnamed boy to "definitely" be older than Bor and Loetje, because "he knows that if you put clay into an oven it hardens, and I don't think that Loetje and Bor would know that."[37] This belief that "more knowledge = older" also extended to her perception of Bor and Loetje, with Floor determining Loetje to be older than Bor because while Bor still believes in ghosts, Loetje tells him "no those absolutely do not exist."[38] The latter also indicates how being "knowledgeable" is not only a question of knowing a specific thing (e.g. clay hardens in an oven's heat), but also of having knowledge that is factually correct (ghost exists – ghosts do not exist). As with Agamemnon, Floor too did not perceive of herself as unknowing. When I asked her whether *Iep!* is suitable for children, she replied: "when [children] read the book they're going to like it and they'll think that there really are people that could fly."[39] The implicit message there is that she herself knows perfectly well that people cannot really fly. Like Agamemnon, Floor creates a distance between her own personal knowledge and the norm that children lack knowledge.

It has been argued that "the adult individual has been socioculturally conditioned to perceive knowledge as synonymous with 'experience', with 'adulthood'" (Beauvais, *Time* 87). The younger readers I interviewed demonstrate a complex relationship with this conditioning. Ella (9), Louise (9) and David (10) do not explicitly criticise this position. They all suggest that adults know more than them, and as such can gather more meaning from the book. Yet, participants who were only slightly older were much less likely to think of themselves as "unknowing" – while still recognizing the prevalence of this way of thinking about children. Furthermore, when talking about fictional characters, the young readers used perceived knowledge as a criterion to assign an age to characters, sometimes in ways

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[36] Original text: "Ik denk zo dat jongere kinderen wel [XXX] nieuwsgieriger zijn omdat die nog veel moeten leren. En daarom denk ik dat Loetje zich gedraagt als minder jaar"

[37] This exact same parameter for age is also applied by Ans (33): "a 5-year-old wouldn't know that clay needs to be baked."

[38] Original text: "Loetje dan zei van 'nee dat bestaat helemaal niet.'"

[39] Original text: "Als ze dat boek gaan lezen zo dat leuk vinden en denken dat er ook zo echt mensen bestaan die kunnen vliegen."

that seem to challenge their perception of themselves. This point leads well into the next section I wish to discuss.

## Experience and understanding in childhood

Experience is often used as a measuring stick for innocence and wisdom. There is a perception that the more you have it, the less innocent you are, and the closer you are to becoming wise (Faulkner 127; Gubar, "Innocence" [1st edition] 121; Beauvais, *Time* 6; Nodelman 157; Woodward, "Wisdom" 187). But many children experience things adults would like them not to. As Faulkner pointed out, war and death is something many young people are familiar with (128). Furthermore, if wisdom is earned *through experience*, can children's experiences give them access to the wisdom traditionally reserved for adults?

Despite the prevalence of innocence narratives in our cultural construction of children, empirical research that includes child participants has found that actual children are not as naïve and innocent as some would like to believe. A 2013 focus-group based reader-response study conducted by Pope and Round with 150 seven-to-eleven-year-old children found significant moral complexity in children's responses to fiction. Pope and Round claim that these results "[speak] strongly against those critics and reviewers who tend to demean, even write-off the interpretive/imaginative responses of child readers" (271). In this section, I want to focus on two of my younger readers, Ella (9) and Janne (14), and explore how they used their own personal experiences to add nuance to their understanding of characters. I would argue that one can describe their responses as wise, in the sense of being grounded in personal experiences that give them the insight that is often connected to wisdom (e.g. Overall 90).

Ella (9) participated in one of the focus group conversations on *Iep!*, where she reacted strongly to adult readers' comments on older characters' caring nature. To contextualize her remarks, I want to first zoom out a bit. There is a history of idealized portrayals of grandparents in children's literature which, as Henneberg points out, slips into ageist (and in the case of grandmothers – sexist) stereotyping when there is nothing to these characters except the act of caring for others, as this simplifies the width and breadth of old age into the single purpose of self-effacing care ("Nexus" 129). In my conversations about *Iep!*, I noted that multiple participants, of a variety of ages, focussed on the caring and nurturing nature of what they perceived to be older characters. The majority of these assessments were positive: Aniek (27) argued that "they were a bit older because they were also very caring"[40], adding that this behaviour was "typical" of that age group. Eline (67) specifically pointed out the caring nature of these older characters as something she identified with. "That is what older people do. If there's anything that we can still do it's care for our children."[41] Other participants were more critical, such as Boris (49), who

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[40] Original text: "Dat die ouders al ietsje ouder waren omdat die ook zo heel zorgend en zo ja, ja."
[41] Original text: "Ja, dat is hetgeen waar dat de oudere mensen doen of als kinderen nog iets kunnen doen is het zorgen hé."

argued that the same characters were very caring *"despite"* being old.[42] Because of these differing perspectives, I included a further discussion on this idea in the focus group conversation. My question to the participants was whether they felt that being a nurturing person can be tied to the age of the discussed characters. The focus group's oldest participant, Eline (67) – who, prior to this question, had led significant portions of the conversation – immediately agreed. She reiterated the argument she made in her individual interview, stating that caring is sometimes "all that is left"[43], which tied back into an earlier discussion we had in the focus group on the topic of the lack of purpose older people can experience in modern society.

After a short silence, 9-year-old Ella – the youngest participant of the focus group conversation – chimed in. She started by saying that she does not really agree, and proceeded to share stories of her own strained relationship with her grandparents:

> My mother was beaten by her parents. I try to send them cards and they ask me to visit them […] But they never sent birthday cards or anything. […] I think it depends [on the person]. My father's aunt is 83 and she is very kind and spoils us.[44]

Ella's story ended with the remark: "for me, they are not really grandma and grandpa, they are just my mother's parents."[45] This remark contains a poignant tension between Ella's experiences with her mother's parents and the meaning and weight she gives to the titles "grandma and grandpa."

Notably, following Ella's resistance to the generalization that old people are inherently caring, the conversation briefly shifted into a discussion of how being a caring person is not perhaps necessarily related to age, but the result of personal circumstances. Moon (41), for instance, replied: "I do agree with Ella. I know children who are very caring. Perhaps it is more related to your personality than your age."[46] In the subsequent conversation the caring nature of the older parents in *Iep!* was (partially) dislodged from their age, and instead seen more as an inherent trait of these specific characters. In this way, the youngest participant's disagreement with the older participants – motivated by her own experiences – led to a short but revealing discussion of the age norms that older readers had promoted just a few minutes before, which added important nuance to the focus group discussion about this norm. Following Moon's comment, Aniek (27) added: "One

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[42] Original text: "Ja die ouders zijn dan heel zorgend ondanks het feit dat die heel oud zijn."

[43] Original text: "Er blijft soms voor ouders niet veel anders niet meer over dan de zorg eigenlijk."

[44] Original text: "Mijn mama […] is geslagen door haar ouders […] ik probeer daar nu wel kaartjes naar te sturen en die zeggen zo van ja je mag langskomen [maar] die hebben mij nooit verjaardagskaartjes en zo gestuurd. En toen dat ik geboren werd hebben die ook helemaal niets laten weten. En ja ik vind dus niet echt-. Dat hangt er van af de tante van mijn papa [XXX] 83 jaar en zij is dan zo wel heel lief en zo en zij verwent ons."

[45] Original text: "Voor mij zijn die niet echt oma en opa. Ze zijn voor mij gewoon de ouders van mijn mama."

[46] Original text: "Ik ben het toch wel eens met Ella. Ik ken ook hele zorgzame kinderen. Ik denk dat het ook misschien meer te maken heeft met persoonlijkheid dan met leeftijd."

person might just be more caring than someone else, but I can imagine that when you have kids that that drive to care for them remains very present into old age."[47] Eline quickly affirmed this viewpoint. Jasper (63) wanted to comment but suffered from technical difficulties. These issues also ended this part of the conversation. In her follow-up interview, Eline (67) commented further on the impact Ella's intervention had on her:

> Yeah I might have been quite explicit in talking about caring. And that girl, that young lady, basically reprimanded me. Well that's a big word, but I did hear a different perspective that made me reconsider my opinion, or at least made me add nuance.[48]

Ella's contribution was perhaps the most poignant example, but other young participants also shared experiences that shaped their perspective on adult characters. *Iep!* includes multiple interactions between Loetje and her unnamed father, with their relationship being somewhat strained due to the father's intense work schedule, taking him away from home for days on end. In my interview with 14-year-old Janne, she offered a nuanced perspective on the father, motivated at least in part through her experiences with her own father, who often had to leave for work: "I remember how much I didn't like it when my dad left. So I can identify with Loetje."[49] She did remark that Loetje's father was her least favourite character, but compared to some older participants her judgment was more nuanced. Ans (33), Clara (50) and Fieke (75) called him – among other things –, "a jerk"[50], "a dickhead"[51], and "robot-like"[52], while Janne's view allowed for the possibility of parental affection as well. She remembered being sad when her father left, but also felt that Loetje should not be too hard on her fictional father, because after all: "he works *for* her right? To give her food and shelter."[53] In that sense, she contextualized the fictional father's cold behaviour through a bigger picture of care for his daughter, based on her own real-life father's struggles.

For Ella and Janne, it was not their lack of experience that determined their analyses of character, but in fact the opposite. Their own personal experiences with sensitive topics guided their perspective and allowed them to show remarkable personal insight and nuance in the way they constructed the age of various characters. In Ella's case, her

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[47] Original text: "Dat inderdaad de ene persoon misschien gewoon zorgzamer is dan de andere, maar ik kan mij wel voorstellen als je kinderen krijgt dat je zorgzaamheid naar je kinderen wel iets is dat heel erg-, ja aanwezig is en ook wel blijft met ouder worden."

[48] Original text: "Ja over die zorg was ik misschien nogal expliciet. En ik werd dan eigenlijk door dat meisje, door die jongere werd ik dan eigenlijk teruggefloten, is een groot woord, maar dan hoorde ik toch een ander verhaal. En dan moest ik mijn mening toch een beetje herzien of nuanceren, ik zal het zo zeggen."

[49] Original text: "Ik weet ook gewoon hoe ik dat vroeger niet echt leuk vond. Dus dan kan ik mij daar zowat in verplaatsen."

[50] Original text: "rotzak"

[51] Original text: "eikel"

[52] Original text: "als een robotje"

[53] Original text: "En die werkt ook voor Loetje eigenlijk hé. Voor haar eten te geven. En te wonen."

experiences with her grandparents caused her to distance herself from stereotypes of older adults that see them as inherently caring and self-effacing. In contrast, Janne demonstrated insight into the complexities of middle adulthood and the demands of parents as providers and caretakers. Though she disliked Loetje's father, Janne recognized that the father had responsibilities that prohibited him from being present in Loetje's life. At the very least, Janne and Ella were no citizens of childhood arcadia, but demonstrated first-hand experience with relevant "adult" worldly matters. Hence, if we argue that wisdom is "balanced reflection and judgment" (Woodward, "Wisdom" 187), then Ella and Janne demonstrate this ability arguably more than some adult readers, whose analyses initially relied more on uncritical perpetuation of age norms in the case of the focus group conversation on the one hand, or the direct, fairly unnuanced condemnation of Loetje's father on the other. In fact, due to Ella's intervention in the focus group, some adults reconsidered the age norm that older people are caring people.

In exploring young participants' perspectives, it becomes clear that concepts such as "categorization", "decategorization" and "personalization" can become fuzzy when applied to empirical reader-response data. For readers to apply a category, they need to have some awareness of an available "social stereotype" (Schneider, "Construction" 619). My data suggests that this awareness exists, but that this entails more than uncritical acceptance, with some young readers admitting to a self-aware performance of childhood innocence for their own gain. In a way, those readers demonstrated what Schneider refers to as "individuation" in which they "change some important aspects of the model, though leaving the initial category membership intact" ("Construction" 623). No child reader self-identified as not-a-child, but some nevertheless listed concrete personal examples of how they do not necessarily consider themselves fitting within that broader cultural stereotype. At the same time, younger readers also applied an individuation process to characters via those characters' perceived knowledge, at various instances reflecting on how much knowledge or curiosity characters express to determine if and how they fit under the broader category of "child." Furthermore, the focus groups also showed alternative ways through which perspectives on characters can change. Older readers initially applied a "social stereotype" category (Schneider, "Construction" 619) to older characters built on the age norm that older adults are inherently caring. Upon hearing Ella's comments, the adult participants did not decategorize Warre and Tine as older people, nor were they individuated as part-of-that-category-but-just-a-bit-quirky, instead the idea that that category itself inherently included a propensity for nurturing behaviour was modified.

### 3.1.1.1.3 Adult readers

As with younger readers, adult readers also used innocence and wisdom as age norms in complex ways to reflect both on themselves and on the age of child and adult characters. While some patterns emerged, there was also a significant amount of individual difference. Below I want to highlight several dynamics that complement each other, sometimes through their overlap, and sometimes through their differences. The intent is to relate the

kaleidoscopic variety in how age is linked to innocence and wisdom and how this affects the understanding of characters.

## Innocence and old age

Teenage and early adult participants were the youngest to use the actual word "innocence" (i.e. "onschuld" in Dutch) in their analyses, though they did not self-identify as innocent or associate themselves with related traits (e.g. lacking knowledge/experience). They did, however, apply the age norm of innocence to other age groups, especially characters that were perceived as young. 19-year-old Fons is one of the most explicit users of innocence as an age norm for youth, additionally connecting this with gender. Upon being asked why he ranked Loetje as being younger than Bor, he argued that while all young children are innocent, he considers "young girls to be just a bit more innocent than young boys."[54] However, Fons extended the suitability of this age norm to other age groups as well. He estimated that Warre and Tine are around 65 years old and motivated this choice by arguing that their innocence reminded him of his grandparents: "I recognize my grandparents' innocence in them. The innocence of old people."[55] I asked how he related this to his earlier assessment of innocence in youth, to which he replied that he was aware he was contradicting himself but added that he sees innocence develop over time with age in the shape of a "parabola, my grandparents are more innocent than my own parents."[56] Though less explicit, some other readers in their early adulthood concurred that you return to innocence or naivety with age. Helena (28), for example, remarked that Warre and Tine are "older because they are both perhaps a bit naïve."[57] She argues that this is illustrated by their struggles to navigate the big city – a place which she sees as synonymous with youthful energy (more in the sense of adolescence and early adulthood), and thus no longer really suitable for Warre and Tine. Like Fons, Helena also ascribed this same naivety to younger characters. She participated in the focus group conversation. There, Akke (41) suggested that Loetje was roughly 14 years old. Helena reflected on this, and replied that Loetje couldn't be 14 years old because she "still has such a vivid imagination and is so naïve,"[58] traits which made Loetje much younger than 14 for Helena.

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[54] Original text: "[O]mdat ik jonge meisjes misschien net iets onschuldiger beschouw als jonge jongens, [en] daarom ze jonger inschat."

[55] Original text: "De onschuld van mijn grootouders herken ik er ook wel in. De onschuld van oude mensen."

[56] Original text: "een parabool van jong en dan - mijn grootouders vind ik onschuldiger dan mijn eigen ouders"

[57] Original text: "wat dat ook meespeelt in het feit dat ze ouder [xxx] ze wel alle twee misschien een beetje wereldvreemd zijn."

[58] Original text:

Akke (41): "Ik had Loetje toch wel wat ouder ingeschat. Ik dacht eerder zo rond de 14 jaar. Omdat ze

When we zoom out, Fons and Helena's comments can be contextualized in a broader cultural tendency to connect childhood and old age by ascribing to them certain interchangeable characteristics: "the nature of these characteristics is extensive, ranging from physical weakness and the need for care or education, to wisdom and moral superiority" (Joosen, "Introduction" 5). There are several cultural tropes and metaphors that emphasize this connection between childhood and old age. There is, for example, the puer senex trope[59]: "the wise man who is 'at once an old man and a little child'" (Murphy 111; see also Mariconda 207). Joosen discusses Mrs. van Amersfoort in Guus Kuijer's *The Book of Everything* as an example of this trope. She "is a female puer senex. The old woman draws happiness from the little girl she once was, transgressing the boundaries of time and age [and] embodying traits of different generations at once " (Joosen, *Adulthood* 191). There is also the adjacent metaphor of the aging process as a staircase where "toddlers traversed up stairs [sic] and then descended another set of stairs to death" (Achenbaum, "Historical Perspectives" 23). Here, old age and youth are not drawn together into a single entity, but are rather constructed as being equally removed from adulthood, though children are still ascending towards the peak of adulthood while old age is marked by decline. Pickard poignantly phrases this as "the staircase rises, then falls away, ultimately into broken darkness" (85). So, "[y]outh and old age are not so much combined in the same person but are, rather, cast as comparable stages in the life course" (Joosen, "Introduction" 6). The steps of life and the puer senex are examples of cultural tropes and metaphors that aim to highlight similarities between young and old, with some consolidating old age and youth into one character, while others stress their supposed similarities in relation to an adult norm.

The potential for this dynamic to go either way into positive or negative shared stereotyping is emblematic of the nuance with which age norms operate in society. Fons' analyses in particular are illustrative of some of this complexity, as his view on Warre, Tine and Loetje is not only rooted in what he perceives as their shared innocence, he also ascribes particular values to this innocence grounded in age. Note that his ascription of innocence to Loetje is not accompanied by a negative assessment. Loetje, according to Fons, demonstrates qualities such as "a childlike sense of adventure"[60] and "independence."[61] However, in his discussion of Warre and Tine, there is a more disparaging element, which Fons (19) also explicitly recognizes:

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inderdaad wel een week alleen wordt gelaten en ze trekt er alleen op uit. Ik vind dat Loetje heel zelfstandig overkomt."

Helena (28): "Ik vond dat ze te veel fantasie of te naïef was misschien voor een 14-jarige. Die te veel met andere zaken bezig was."

[59] Puer and Senex are Latin terms and respectively mean "child" and "old man."
[60] Original text: "kinderlijke avontuurlijkheid"
[61] Original text: "Ze komt vrij zelfstandig over."

> Yeah it seemed to me that [the adults in the story] weren't that intelligent. This may be wrong of me, but I noticed that especially with Warre and Tine, that they appeared to be a bit naive.[62]

So, in Fons' analysis, innocence is normal and accepted when found in a younger character, yet becomes comparatively more negative and illustrative of a lack of intelligence when applied to older characters. This, combined with his "parabola" of innocence, suggests Fons structures the return of innocence in old age as a form of decline that envisions "old age as a childlike state" in which "older people are denied the status of being fully adult", thus shifting into ageism (Featherstone and Hepworth 358). Middle-aged adults are described as not-innocent, and more intelligent than Warre, Tine and Loetje. Both the child and the older adult are positioned as being removed from intelligent adulthood due to them possessing innocence, though crucially, the child is afforded room for growth.

Here, I want to return to Nikolajeva's observation that we live in an "aetonormative" culture –a culture that takes adulthood as the default norm from which childhood then deviates, i.e. "adult normativity" (*Power* 8). Fons' comments align with aetonormative views, but also add further complexity beyond a child – adult dichotomy. Old age, like childhood, has a history of being "othered" from normative adulthood (Pickard 78). Fons' innocence parabola not only makes this explicit, it also echoes the aforementioned "steps of life" (Achenbaum, "Historical Perspectives" 23) in which youth and old age are characterized by their shared distance from the peak of middle-aged adulthood (Joosen, "Introduction" 6). Fons' aetonormative view of the aging process positions Loetje, Warre and Tine on either side of the normalized ideal age: middle adulthood. His "position" on the innocence parabola should also be recognized. Fons is still firmly on the side that grows towards knowledgeable, intelligent adulthood. I will return to Fons' comments and their significance for illustrating aetonormativity in a later section where I contrast them with older readers' views on their wisdom.

To end this section, I want to acknowledge that there were also a number of readers who identified the same traits in these characters as Helena and Fons, but struggled to reconcile them with age. Jasmijn (30), for example, noted Warre and Tine's apparent naivety but saw it as an idiosyncrasy innate to the characters, not an age-bound quality: "I think it's typical of these characters but is not necessarily grounded in their age. I think that Warre and Tine […] well they just don't appear to be very smart."[63] Boris (49) was similarly

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[62] Original text: "Voor mij kwam dat over alsof die mensen eigenlijk niet zo intelligent waren en ik vond dat dat bij, dat is misschien fout bij mij, maar voor mij kwam dat heel hard boven bij Warre en Tinne. Dat die zo'n beetje naïef overkomen."

[63] Original text: "Ik denk dat wel typisch is voor de personages maar niet per se voor hun leeftijd. Ik denk dat Warre en Tine […] ja, ze komen ook niet over als super slim."

struggling to "age" these characters, stating that "rationally, I'd say they are 60-65 years old, but the way they go to the travel agent to ask for information […] Yeah that's something a younger child would do."[64]

Ans' (33) analysis of the adult and child characters also fits within this dynamic and illustrates how a trait that readers connect to several characters can adopt different meanings depending on the perceived age of the characters. First of all, like Ella (9), Louise (9), Agamemnon (11), Fons (19), and other readers, Ans uses a lack of knowledge as the dominant narrative through which a character is perceived as young. Specifically, Viegeltje being portrayed as learning new things leads Ans to perceive her as a child. Like Fons' view on Loetje, there is no negative connotation to Viegeltje's initial deficit of knowledge – Ans perceives this as normal. However, Ans simultaneously judges the adult characters in the story as not being realistic fictional representations of adulthood, claiming that they were all too "dumb" to be credible adults. Without making any explicit claims about her own age group, Ans nevertheless implicitly predicates successful and normal adulthood on adults' supposed high(er) level of intelligence and insight. When I asked Ans whether she could offer an example of how the adults in *Iep!* were too dumb to be credible, she reflected that: "if you are truly sound of mind you do not voluntarily allow yourself to be committed to a home for those who are not."[65] Thus, the rationalisation offered by Fons about Warre and Tine being older and thus returning to childhood innocence is absent here. Instead, for Ans, adults have knowledge and children do not. An adult character portrayed as lacking knowledge is not older, but unrealistic or not credible.

"Innocence" as an abstract age norm and its corollary element of "knowledge" emerge as complex factors in how they are used by teenage and adult readers to describe child and adult characters. While some participants expressed the belief that older characters are more innocent and lacking in knowledge, others struggled to do so, while some outright rejected adult characters as credible due to their lack of insight or knowledge. Fons (19) and Helena (28), the two readers who most explicitly connected innocence to both youth *and* old age, are a late adolescent and young adult. With older readers, innocence/naivety/lack of knowledge was still brought up in relation to older and adult characters, but more in the context of readers' incomprehension, disagreement, or confusion as to why these characters behaved in such a way. Meanwhile, the older readers were less inclined to talk about innocence, instead emphasizing wisdom and knowledge. In fact, I did not purposefully exclude old adult readers from the above discussion. Their absence here is a result from their lack of reference to the innocence of the old as an age norm, or as a way of aging the characters. In the next section I will focus on an interrelated

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[64] Original text: "Dus rationeel zou ik dan zeggen 60-65, maar dan vind ik dat zo [X] dat die naar een reisbureau gaan […] Zo ja dat is meer voor jongere kinderen hé"

[65] Original text: "Als je bij u volledig gezond verstand bent laat je u niet vrijwillig opnemen in een huis voor mensen zonder vol verstand."

dynamic: the rising importance of wisdom, its link to experience, and the often older readers who used this age norm.

## The rise of wisdom

As with innocence, readers' use of wisdom as an age norm carried complex nuances. While the exact interpretation of "wisdom" differed among readers, older participants more often stressed the importance of the experience you gather with age and the wisdom this bestows, and used this both in describing their own experience of age, and as a tool to "age" the characters. In fact, while some younger readers talked about the knowledge and perspective older people acquire over time, the words "wisdom" or "wise" were never mentioned by readers younger than thirty. Though wisdom is difficult to adequately define (Lorraine Green [1st edition] 183), readers generally used the term in ways that approximate Woodward's definition of wisdom as "a capacity for balanced reflection and judgment that can only accrue with long experience", specifically including her added comment that "wisdom has almost always been understood as predicated on a lack of certain kinds of feelings-the passions, for instance, including anger" ("Wisdom" 187).

Tilly (36) was the youngest participant to reflect extensively on this topic. She pondered: "does age matter? Yes, but experience is equally important. Life experience and wisdom increases as one becomes older, just because stuff happens to you."[66] She grounded her use of this age norm in memories of her deceased grandmother: "she was a truly well-rounded wise woman who didn't care what the world thought of her."[67] Akke (41) also identified emotional detachment as a major positive change that she had experienced over time as she aged. She argued that "compared to younger colleagues I'm much more relaxed. I no longer become upset over things that used to anger me."[68] Clara (50) remembers how much she struggled when she was younger and reflects that she has now gathered "a lot more wisdom,"[69] and that her memories of past strife grant her "a lot of understanding"[70] for young people and their struggles. Kling's (55) perspective is similar, stating that "experience makes you wiser"[71] and that "it makes me [...] maybe more relaxed."[72] Wisdom is so important for her identity that she remarked that "if I could return to being young again, I don't know if I would do it because I would miss all that

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[66] Original text: "[H]eeft dat dan met leeftijd te maken? Ja, maar ook met ervaring. Levenservaring en wijsheid komt met de jaren, gewoon omdat je dingen meemaakt."

[67] Original text: "Een heel gegronde wijze vrouw die zo [xxx] wat de wereld van haar dacht maar gewoon zichzelf kon zijn."

[68] Original text: "Als ik mij vergelijk met jongere collega's dan vind ik mijzelf rustiger. Ik zal mij minder opboeien in dingen waar dat ik mij vroeger wel druk in gemaakt had."

[69] Original text: "Veel meer wijsheid gekregen in al die jaren."

[70] Original text: "Dus ik heb heel veel begrip voor pubers of jonge mensen die het moeilijk hebben soms."

[71] Original text: "Met ervaringen die je opdoet word je met de jaren wijzer"

[72] Original text: "dat maakt mij [...] misschien rustiger"

experience."[73] Finally, Roma (62) added that "ageing gives you more perspective. I like being able to better understand things, and I also like that I have become more lenient over the years and see things more in perspective."[74]

Older readers' emphasis on personal wisdom was matched with an inclination to connect wisdom to characters and their ages. Older readers talk of characters' "experience", but also directly refer to their "wisdom" – a word that is not even used by participants younger than Ans (33).[75] This trend of older readers ascribing more importance to accumulated experience and its consequent crystallization as wisdom reached its zenith with Jasper (63). Jasper argued that Warre and Tine are both exceedingly wise, but that Tine was wiser and thus older than Warre:

> "I like to think of her as older. Because […] I think she's wiser than Warre. […] Old people are often very wise people. […] In what they say, the way they talk, their way of looking at the world. And the questions they ask. […]"[76]

To illustrate Tine's wisdom, Jasper spontaneously refers to the following passage from *Iep!*: "'are you one of those newspaper or tv people?' the old man asked. 'No', Tine replied, 'we're our own people'" (89).[77] Jasper adds that this quote exemplifies Tine's way of speaking, which is "not very spectacular but so wise."[78] He then shifts into self-reflection.

> "And if I think about how wise I am myself, how incredibly wise I am myself. You only become wiser with age you know. So, you have an amazing future ahead of you Leander, because you are of course still a young rascal. […] Compared to me of course."[79]

In this moment of self-reflection, Jasper's age becomes synonymous with wisdom, which he stresses as something unequivocally positive to look forward to: "an amazing future."

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[73] Original text: "Moest ik nu zo mogen terugkeren naar een jongere leeftijd, ik weet niet of ik dat wel zou willen. Want meestal mis je dan alle ervaring die je onderweg opgedaan hebt."

[74] Original text: "Ja door ouder te worden ofwel een inzicht rijker […] wat vind ik ook leuk denk ik, en ik denk dat dat ook met de leeftijd is gekomen is milder, meer kunnen relativeren."

[75] I should acknowledge here that Fons (19) does use the Dutch word "wijs" but with a different meaning. ("Hij raakt er niet wijs uit" i.e. "It doesn't make sense for him")

[76] Original text: "Ik heb eigenlijk liever dat ze ouder is. Omdat ik vind haar […]net iets wijzer nog dan Warre. […] Oude mensen zijn vaak heel wijze mensen. […] In wat ze zeggen, hoe ze praten, hoe ze naar de wereld kijken. En de vragen die ze zich stellen."

[77] Original text:
'U bent toch niet van de krant of de tv?'
'Nee hoor,' zei Tine, 'we zijn van onszelf.' (89)

[78] Original text: "dat is niet wereldschokkend maar dat is zo wijs."

[79] Original text: "Als ik kijk hoe wijs dat ik zelf, hoe ongelofelijk wijs dat ik zelf ben. Ge wordt alleen maar wijzer met ouder te worden he. Dus ge hebt nog een schitterende toekomst voor u Leander want gij zijt natuurlijk nog een jonge snuik he."

Jasper's reflections on Warre and Tine offer an intriguing contrast with Fons' (19) assessment of these same characters. Broadly speaking, the traits that older reader Jasper identified as wisdom – acquired with age – younger reader Fons found to be indicative of innocence, naivety and a lack of intelligence. Both readers' views on the aging process can be expressed as intriguingly different "graphs." To reiterate, Fons (19) shaped the aging process as a parabola that suggests a parallel between old age and childhood. In doing so, he adopts the premise of the steps of life in which the ageing process is visualised as a staircase that rises until middle-age, after which it falls (Pickard 85). Jasper, in contrast, sketches the development of wisdom as a never-ending upward staircase, believing in more or less infinite development and growth as one ages. The best time always lies ahead, never in the past.

One of the most prevalent narratives about old age is that it is a time of "decline which continues relentlessly into old age and death" (Featherstone and Hepworth 2005: 357); this causes the aging process to be "increasingly aligned with dread and evil" (Goldman 2015: 73). Scholars like Gullette criticize this narrative of decline for being "a threat to […] intergenerational harmony, the pursuit of happiness, the ability to write a progress narrative, and the fullest possible experience of life itself" (15). Jasper's perspective on wisdom effectively offers a partial alternative to such a decline narrative. Wisdom is directly connected to age, thus providing at least one way in which decline is countered.

Jasper (63) and Fons (19) each adopt a particular aetonormative stance. They respect young people, but nevertheless construct adulthood as their "preferred state of being" (Gubar, "Hermeneutics" 297). The key difference lies in their perception of the second half of adulthood, i.e. after middle-adulthood. Fons' aetonormativity "others" old adults, by drawing a parallel with childhood that emphasizes decline. Meanwhile, Jasper's aetonormative stance envisions ageing (at least in terms of wisdom) as a process of never-ending positive growth, where adults in their twenties are still seen as "unfinished" and in a sense inferior to the much wiser, older adults, as seen in Jasper's direct positioning as superior to me – the researcher – based on our ages.

Some of the comments made by adult readers in this section demonstrate the subjectivity of (de)categorization, individuation and personalization processes. Fons and Jasper arguably both apply stringent categorization in the sense that they understand and give meaning to Warre and Tine's existence fully through their membership of the "older person" category. Nothing they do is described as extraordinary or strange within the parameters of that category. That being said, Fons and Jasper's construction of the category itself is wildly different, which leads to disparate assessments of the same general textual information, as they each are drawn to different passages that affirm their category of "older person". Schneider's model recognizes the importance of the reader's social class and other aspects in determining their response to categorization effects, but nevertheless suggests that the author has a high level of control over how the reader will respond.

Schneider suggests that "[b]y picking up a well-established mechanism of social categorization, authors need therefore use only a very small number of hints to achieve a certain disposition towards the character in the reader" ("Construction" 623). However, Jasper and Fons show the subjectivity of a category being "well-established." Both see their analyses as making sense within their construction of "old adults", thus interpreting specific textual passages through their own lens and ending up with different readings. In contrast, readers like Ans (33) apply a decategorization process, in which the characters are described as "non-credible" adults because their descriptions are so discordant with Ans' internalized "adult" category.

## Can youth be wise?

Besides connecting wisdom to older characters, some older readers also found younger characters to be wise, an assessment that was not necessarily negative, but rather one of borderline confusion, often including the rationalization of the young-but-wise character being somewhat abnormally adult. Tommy (60) for instance argued that Loetje was "the prototypical child,"[80] adding that "those children have something very adult about them […] they can be childish but they can also spout wisdom."[81] She continues to list examples of fictional children which she perceives as wise – and by extension difficult to pin down to a specific age group – such as Pippi Longstocking and Calvin (from Calvin and Hobbes). This assessment is then further supported through Tommy's experience with her daughter. She argues that "it's possible for a child to say very adult things. I have a very philosophical daughter. […] She was born a philosopher. She said things you'd normally only expect from an adult."[82] Femke (62) held a somewhat similar opinion. She claimed that "you have very wise teenagers, wise children and wise adults too. You have adults who are adult sooner than others and older people who are younger than some young people,"[83] adding later that "sometimes there is an old soul in young people […]. It's like, wow it's not possible that they already are that wise at that age you know. Yeah I call that having an old soul."[84] She later applies this reasoning in her analysis of Mimoen, a character from *Voor altijd samen, amen* who she felt was quite the "wise boy for his age."[85] While discussing that same book, Madelief (45) remarked that the main character Polleke is "very wise" and has "a tremendous amount of insight, much more insight than the average eleven-year old

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[80] Original text: "voor mij was dat wel zo een prototype van een kind"

[81] Original text: "Die kinderen hebben ook iets heel volwassen […] die kan ook wijsheden spuien."

[82] Original text: "Een kind heeft ook in zich om heel volwassen dingen te zeggen. Ik heb een heel filosofische dochter […]. Die is filosofisch geboren. Die deed uitspraken die je normaal van een volwassene verwacht."

[83] Original text: "Je hebt zo heel wijze jongeren, wijze kinderen [pauze] en je hebt wijze volwassenen ook en je hebt volwassenen die vroeger ouder zijn dan anderen en je hebt oude mensen die jonger zijn dan sommige jonge mensen."

[84] Original text: "Ik vind dat er soms in jonge mensen een oude ziel kan zitten[…]. Dat is echt van amai dat kan niet dat die op die leeftijd al die wijsheid heeft of zo, ja ik noem dat dan een oude ziel die erin zit."

[85] Original text: "wijze jongen voor zijn leeftijd"

has,"[86] while Carolien (69) remarks that "at times she is more adult than a eleven-year old child. The fact that she thinks so much about her surroundings and about people. […] not so carefree as so many children are."[87]

Madelief (45), Tommy (60), Femke (62) and Carolien's (69) outlook is grounded in a particular type of aetonormative lens. They do not see it as *inherently* impossible for children or younger people to carry wisdom with them. However, gaining wisdom does come at the cost of some level of childness. A wise child is in a sense a compromised child. It has lost its "young soul." That being said, this change is not perceived as negative. Beauvais has argued that "the myth of child precocity […] celebrates both the early signs of adulthood in the child and the fact that these signs remain firmly contained within a childish body" ("Giftedness" 289). The readers I mentioned above all relay a sense of admiration for the children they identify as possessing wisdom. Barbara Lawrence, writing about the intricacies of age norms, points out that "being seen as younger than expected or ahead of schedule frequently produces a positive evaluation. The 12-year-old who attends college acquires high status, as does the 22-year-old whose animated cartoon gets nominated for an Academy Award" (210). That being said, this admiration for children who achieve adult milestones ahead of schedule has its limits. Children expressing an interest in sexuality, for example, is instead perceived as a cause for concern, instead of admirable precocity (Egan and Hawkes 313).

In the case of *Iep!*'s Loetje and *Voor altijd samen, amen*'s Mimoen and Polleke, it is their mental faculties that are the topic of admiration. Beauvais writes that it is "a corollary of the aetonormative bias" that "age becomes metonymous with superiority, confirming the paradigmatic view that knowledge is age-related" (*Time* 86). For Madelief (45), Tommy (60), Femke (62) and Carolien (69), a young character can be admired for their wisdom, but having said trait changes their status as a child. Thus, Loetje is not merely a wise child, she has "something very adult" about her, while Mimoen "carries an old soul." Essentially, a "normal" child cannot be wise. Eline's (67) perspective also aligns with these views. In discussing *Iep!*'s unnamed boy character who lives on the green hallway, she lauded his perspective on art, stating that imperfections are an inherent part of art and add to – instead of subtract from – art's beauty. She does not use the word "wisdom" but does suggest that this realization is an important "life-lesson", adding that while such lessons "transcend all ages", it is still the element that made her realize this character "is no longer a child."[88]

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[86] Original text: "zeer veel inzicht, veel meer inzicht dan ik denk dat de doorsnee elfjarige heeft. […] Ik vind Polleke ook heel wijs."
[87] Original text: "Ze is op bepaalde momenten volwassener dan een kind van elf. Het feit dat ze zoveel nadenkt over haar omgeving, over de mensen. […] Niet zo zorgeloos zoals heel veel kinderen denk ik wel meer zijn."
[88] Original text: "Dat is eigenlijk een levensles. Dat overstijgt alle leeftijden. Maar ja. Daar merk je dat het geen kind meer is voor mij."

Clara (50) also measures wisdom in how much experience someone has, but goes further in decoupling that process from age than Tommy and Femke. With regards to the character Loetje, she believes she "will *become* a wise little lady,"[89] thus still asserting that – as she is still young, she is not yet wise. Furthermore, in discussing age more broadly, she adds that "you can be wise at 25 but you can also be foolish at 25, just as you can be foolish at 75. It just depends on what you've done in life. […] Some 25-year-olds have more wisdom than some 65-year-olds."[90] This is also the perspective that shapes Moon's (41) shifting response to youthful wisdom after participating in a focus group conversation that included younger readers. Moon was among the older readers in the focus group in which Ella (9) shared how her grandparents beating her mother gave her a more complex perspective on the caring nature of older people. In my follow-up interview, Moon remarked that "I thought everything Ella said was incredibly wise. Maybe she is just a very wise girl, that is of course possible. But I also feel I should give children more credit in those areas."[91] Through Ella's sharing of her story, grounded in what she has experienced in her family life, Moon accepts youthful wisdom without any added reflection that Ella appeared wise beyond her years. Moon does not restrict her insight to Ella specifically, instead she admits that she should give children in general more credit. Together with Clara (50), she represents the view that wisdom is achievable at any age.

Consequently, Jasper's utter belief in, and propagation of, the age norm of wisdom as being strictly the realm of old adults was not affirmed by all older-adult readers. What does tend to be true among the participants of my research project, is that starting with readers in their forties, readers are likely to think of themselves as wise, or at least wiser than they (Akke (41); Boris (49); Clara (50); Kling (55); Alice (57); Roma (62); Jasper (63)) were in youth. Some then limit that wisdom to their age group only (such as Jasper), while others allow for the possibility that children or younger adults can very well be wise, either by chance or under certain circumstances. For some of these adult readers, childhood wisdom – however – is perceived as changing the young characters, leaving them chronologically children but partially severed from symbolic childhood. This can be argued to be a watered-down version of Green's argument that "the abused child is no longer a child" (Lorraine Green [1st edition] 74). Here we find that – for some adult readers – the wise child is less of a child than the innocent child. Childhood wisdom thus both operates as an unproblematic component of a social category for some readers, who ascribe this quality to all child characters as a broad generalization; and for others it is part of an

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[89] Original text: "Loetje, ja dat wordt ook een wijs vrouwtje. Ik denk het wel."

[90] Original text: "Je hebt wijze mensen van 25 maar je hebt ook dwaze mensen van 25 of dwaze mensen van 70, dat bestaat ook nog hé. Hangt er maar van mij vanaf wat je in uw leventje hebt gedaan al. […] Sommige mensen van 25 vind ik meer wijsheid hebben dan iemand van 65 kan hebben."

[91] Original text: "Ik denk ook dat op basis van wat ik Ella heb horen vertellen dat ik dan allemaal zo ontzettend wijs vond. Misschien is dat gewoon een heel wijs meisje dat kan dan toch natuurlijk ook. Dat ik misschien mezelf erop betrapte toch dat ik kinderen wat meer krediet kan geven, wat dat zo een dingen betreft."

individuation process for individual characters. For those readers, children and child characters are not inherently wise, but encountering a wise child character is not so unimaginable that it leads to the character being decategorized as a child, instead leading to an individuated model of a child character who is granted additional complexity (Schneider, "Construction" 619).

### What readers and characters can handle: *Voor altijd samen, amen* and innocence

Finally, I want to briefly reflect on a set of related comments made by adult readers of *Voor altijd samen, amen*. In particular, I want to outline a broader conversation that entangles readers' reflections on the book's subject matter, how the book handles this subject matter, and the related perception of Polleke, the main character. Compared to *Iep!*, *Voor altijd samen, amen* deals with heavier topics, such as drug use, sex, and romantic relationships. This led several adult readers to wonder whether child readers can handle these topics, whether they are appropriate for children in the first place, and how the story's events affect Polleke. Few readers commented on every aspect of this discourse, but some patterns emerge if we contextualize readers' remarks in a broader conversation on innocence and the danger of knowledge. That being said, in contrast to previous sections, the patterns I explore here seem to not be tied to the age of the reader as much as they illustrate the "cohabitation" of age norms that can emerge within a population (Beauvais, *Time* 70).

In various ways, the quotes I am about to discuss all engage to some degree with Lowe's "Unknowing Child" (275), in particular the "idea that children need protection from danger and threats" (270). The threat, in this case, is mainly knowledge. Oonis (52) broadly commented on all the things Polleke experiences in the book, and criticized the adults around her for not keeping her safe. She remarks that "it is kind of your job as a parent or adult to set boundaries to protect the child [...] from things they cannot comprehend or assess."[92] Other readers adopted a similar perspective, but applied it to the book's readers by pointing out the sections they found containing problematic information. Halfway through *Voor altijd samen, amen*, Polleke's best friend Caro is harassed by a thirteen or fourteen-year-old boy, who steals her football and demands she make out with him if she wants the ball back (76). Beatrijs (26) considers the book's treatment of sexual harassment to be dated, commenting that "I had to look it up and I saw that it's a book from around the year 2000, and I thought yeah if you look at some of this."[93] She stopped this reflection mid-sentence before adding that she struggled to put it into words. Later, she added that

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[92] Original text: "het is ook een beetje je taak als ouder of als volwassene om toch ergens de grens te stellen om het kind te behoeden [...] voor dingen die ze nog niet zelf kunnen bevatten of inschatten."

[93] Original text: "ben ik gaan kijken en dan zag ik dat dat boek was van 2000 of toch die periode. En dan dacht ik ja als je nu naar bepaalde zaken kijkt, bijvoorbeeld zo een zaken ja dat is-. Ja ik kan dat niet zo goed uitleggen hoor"

she does not mind this topic being introduced in children's literature, but that the particular way *Voor altijd samen, amen* handles it is problematic because

> It was treated so light-heartedly. In the book, by the girls. I don't know. They didn't mention it at home and nothing happened about it. [...] Maybe it's because we live in a time where everything-, yeah how should I put this. That this kind of stuff actually is talked about. These are things we used to laugh at or would not notice while reading, because as a child you just don't know.[94]

Thus, Beatrijs frames the book's approach to sexual harassment in a particular outlook she considers outdated, finding it weird and problematic that Polleke and Caro are portrayed as just laughing it off. As part of this perspective, she points to real children's lack of knowledge, noting that "as a child you just don't know" how to handle these things. Like Oonis' comment about children "not comprehending" certain topics and thus needing boundaries, there is an implicit belief beneath Beatrijs' assessment that children lack the context or knowledge to draw the right conclusions from this situation, and might internalize that Polleke and Caro's response is the right one. Thus, Beatrijs implies, children's literature should instead present "correct" ways of handling this kind of behaviour, and the book – in a way – fails its young audience through Polleke's actions. Other readers offered related comments on Polleke's lack of reflection or foresight and characterized them as a sign of Polleke's innocence. Malu (38) remarked that she is "just so pure [...] she radiates innocence I think [...] with innocence I mean that she responds directly to what happens and not what's behind it or what she has thought about."[95]

Joke (27) and Lebronella (30) also commented on ways in which the book as a whole, or Polleke as a character, discusses inappropriate topics for young readers. Joke (27) found it problematic that the book contained the Dutch equivalent of the n-word and, like Beatrijs had done, reflected back on the book's year of publication as an explanation: "Oh yeah '99, but what I found just so remarkable was that the n-word is still used. I thought it was a shame they haven't removed it yet."[96] Like Beatrijs' comment about just "not knowing as a child", Joke remarked that "I don't know if [children] will know the heavy connotation that is attached to [that word] for other people. [...] Now it looks like a normal word, while that

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[94] Original text: "Ja ik vond dat iets problematisch. Ja niet dat dat in dat boek stond hé! Maar gewoon dat dat zo-. Ergens werd er heel luchtig mee omgegaan. In het boek, door de meisjes. En ik weet zo niet. Ik weet het niet. Die hebben dat ook niet thuis verteld en er is zo niets mee gebeurd. Het is daar zowat gestopt. Zo van ze hebben hem wel weggejaagd en hij is weggegaan maar ja ik weet niet. Dat is misschien ook omdat wij nu in een tijd leven waar dat alles-. Dat dat ja meer-, hoe moet ik het zeggen. Dat zo van die zaken echt besproken worden. Dus waar dat wij vroeger mee zouden lachen of over zouden lezen, als kind weet je natuurlijk niet-. Maar dus nu in de huidige [x]. Dat was toch iets waaraan ik had gedacht."

[95] Original text: "Ja ik vind die zo zo puur [...] die straalt een klein beetje zo dat dat onschuldige uit vind ik. [...] Bij onschuldig bedoel ik die ehm die reageert op wat er direct gebeurt niet op wat dat er allemaal achter zit of wat dat ze heeft overdacht."

[96] Original text: "Ah ja, '99, maar wat ik dan wel heel opmerkelijk vond was dan dat het n-woord daar nog in voor kwam, dat vond ik dan wat jammer dat ze dat daar dan niet uitgehaald hadden."

really is not the case anymore in our current context."[97] Meanwhile, Lebronella (30) had concerns about Polleke's views on relationships. In the book, Polleke comments on the marital status of Wouter, her teacher. His exact age is not mentioned, but Polleke remarks that she has "never heard about such a thing. A man his age. Not married!" (61).[98] Lebronella (30) disliked this comment and replied that

> What I always think is that it is beautiful to raise kids to be very open minded and confront them from a very young age that there are couples that are not just man-woman and that there are people that were born in a different body than the one they feel at home in and also that there are in fact people that will never marry in their entire life. Maybe I'm a bit too liberal in that regard. But I think that that is something that could be imparted from a young age and that this is a missed opportunity.[99]

Collectively, this group of readers maintains a view of children as passive knowledge-sponges, incapable of handling certain types of information, and taking whatever Polleke claims at face-value without any resistance. Inside the fictional world itself, the adults around Polleke are criticized for failing to keep Polleke safe from things she should not yet know or be exposed to. Outside of the book, there seems to be an understanding that when young readers encounter Polleke's comments about the teacher not being married, or see her response to Caro being sexually harassed, or read the n-word, that this will uncritically be absorbed. Consequently, it is best to either keep children in the dark altogether about these things and edit those topics out of the book, or to only present the "correct" perspective, supplemented with adult guidance. In a way, young readers are believed to lack the insight to correctly judge whether or not to "incorporate new items of information" in their "pre-stored knowledge structures", and the meaning they should give to that information (Schneider, "Construction" 611).

That being said, this was not the only perspective present in the data. Some perceive Polleke as a particularly wise character, who is used to present important information and perspectives to young readers. Tilly (36) comments that Polleke is "much more articulate and wiser than I was at that age,"[100] and partially points to all the things Polleke has

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[97] Original text: "Ik weet niet of dat zij al weten welke zware connotatie daar voor andere mensen aanhangt. Ja, dat vooral, niet per se dat ze dat woord gaan gebruiken maar dat ze dat gaan, ja dat ze niet zo goed weten wat daar achter zit. Want nu lijkt het zo een normaal woord, terwijl het dat in deze huidige context, vind ik, niet meer is."

[98] Original text: "Daar had ik nog nooit van gehoord. Een man van zijn leeftijd. Niet getrouwd! (61)"

[99] Original text: "Wat ik altijd denk ik is dat het mooi is om kinderen op een heel open minded manier op te voeden en er vanaf een heel jonge leeftijd mee te confronteren bij wijze van spreken dat er ook koppels bestaan die niet man-vrouw zijn en dat er ook mensen bestaan die in een ander lichaam geboren zijn dan waar ze zich thuis voelen en dat er dus ook mensen zijn die nooit gaan trouwen in hun leven. Misschien ben ik iets te liberaal in dat opzicht maar ik denk dat dit iets is wat vanaf een jonge leeftijd had kunnen worden meegegeven en dat dat een gemiste kans is."

[100] Original text: "Ik vind Polleke ook veel uitgesprokener en wijzer dan toen dat ik die leeftijd was."

experienced in her life as a source for that wisdom. Instead of contextualizing Polleke having these experiences as inappropriate for her age, Tilly applauds Polleke's perseverance and her resulting insight, while recognizing that she herself "wasn't exposed to such things as a ten-year old."[101] The same argument also returns on the level of the narrative and its readers, with readers commenting on the positive ways in which *Voor altijd samen*, *amen* introduces difficult topics to child readers. For instance, Maaike (42) applauded *Voor altijd samen, amen*'s subject matter, adding that "you cannot protect your child from the world and you shouldn't protect your child from the world. That is exactly what these books do. They show the world as it is and you can talk about it with your child."[102] On a similar note, Mathilde (68) remarks that difficult topics "belong to the school of life. People need to learn to handle it at a young age and it will strengthen them for later."[103]

Thus, readers such as Joke (27), Lebronella (30) and Oonis (52) identify a certain kind of threat in the topics and perspectives that are presented to both Polleke and the young reader. They operate on a construction of childhood that emphasizes the importance of protecting children and that certain topics are fundamentally unsuited for the readers in *Voor altijd samen, amen*'s intended audience. In contrast, readers such as Maaike (42) and Mathilde (68) emphasize how books like *Voor altijd samen, amen* help children to grow and offer opportunities for parents to discuss difficult topics. Of course, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive. The dividing line between the two is the particular age at which a child is deemed old enough to handle these topics. No reader suggested that the subject matter is inherently unsuitable for publication.

That being said, these were topics that readers felt strongly about. Earlier in this section, I discussed how interacting with Ella (9) in the focus group led Moon (41) and other adult readers to reconsider certain perspectives. During one of the Polleke focus-group discussions, the topic of the appropriateness of *Voor altijd samen, amen*'s subject matter came up. Although the discussion remained civil, it became the most heated argument in any of the focus groups I conducted. Furthermore, the reconsideration that was engendered by Ella (9) in the earlier focus group could not happen here, as no child reader was present in this group discussion. Though readers remained polite, there was comparatively little give and take, with readers firmly sticking to their viewpoints.

It started as soon as Maaike (42) joined. She arrived slightly late and thus missed the section where everyone introduced themselves. When she joined, I asked her to briefly

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[101] Original text: "Als tienjarige was ik aan zulke dingen niet blootgesteld."

[102] Original text: "Ge kunt uw kind niet beschermen tegen de wereld en ge moet uw kind ook niet beschermen tegen de wereld en dat is juist wat dat zo'n boeken doen. Die tonen de wereld zoals ze is en ge kunt daar dus ook over praten met uw kind."

[103] Original text: "Dat behoort tot de leerschool van het leven eigenlijk, mensen moeten daar op jonge leeftijd daar mee leren omgaan en dat wapent hen voor later."

summarize her thoughts on the book. Her very first comment was: "I think it is a book that describes society in a warm and realistic way."[104] This almost immediately prompted a discussion, mainly between Maaike (42) and Roma (62), and to a lesser extent Mathilde (68). I include summarized excerpts below. One particular topic that Roma (62) deemed unsuitable for young readers was Polleke's friend Caro being an IVF baby.

> Roma (62): [Caro] tells Polleke that her dad Hans put his seed in a bottle and that her mom that way and so on. […] the two oldest grandchildren I have are nine and eleven. I was wondering earlier today whether I'd allow them to read this book. In terms of language it is a bit too simple, but in terms of subject matter I thought 'gosh, they'll be overwhelmed or have questions.'[105]

> Maaike (42): But it's reality right. […] When my daughter was in kindergarten, she had a friend made from two moms. It is reality for some children.[106]

> Mathilde (68): That is what I think is a shame. These are all things that happen in our society […] but it's this one girl who experiences all of this. […] I think it is rather unlikely that one person experiences all these problems.[107]

> Maaike (42): I feel like you are too focused on considering these topics as problems. I really don't see it that way. When I read this, I don't experience this as problems but as people's lives, just their lives. All people have different lives and all sorts of things happen in them and that's that.[108]

In looking at this focus group conversation in a vacuum, I could make the observation that it is the oldest two readers who find the text to be the most problematic. However, as I established before, younger readers such as Beatrijs (26) also pointed at sections that they found not suitable for young readers. I do recognize that the motivation behind these similar perspectives is somewhat different. Beatrijs (26) does not mind sexual harassment being discussed in literature for young readers, but wants a better response on Polleke's

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[104] Original text: "Ik vind het een boek dat de maatschappij op een realistische en warme manier beschrijft."

[105] Original text: "Zij vertelt dan aan Pollie, of Polleke dat haar vader Hans het zaad in een flesje doet en op die manier is haar mama dan toch enzovoort […] De twee oudste kleinkinderen die ik heb zijn negen en elf, en ik heb me daarstraks nog afgevraagd, zou ik hen het boek nu al laten lezen, qua taal is het voor hun denk ik net te eenvoudig, maar qua problematieken dacht ik 'goh, die gaan misschien wel overstelpt worden of vragen hebben bij een aantal zaken.'"

[106] Original text: "Maar het is de realiteit he. Dat is een realiteit he, mijn dochter had op de kleuterschool, ik bedoel dat was nog op de kleuterschool, een vriendinnetje die zo uit twee mama's zo gemaakt is dus ja, dat is de realiteit voor sommige kinderen."

[107] Original text: "maar dat vind ik zo het jammere, het zijn allemaal dingen die in onze samenleving aanwezig zijn, […] maar het is dat ene meisje, die Polleke, bij wie dat allemaal te samen komt[…]. Ik vind het meer onwaarschijnlijk dat één persoon al die problemen tegenkomt."

[108] Original text: "Ik heb het gevoel dat jullie ook te veel focussen op problematiek, ik zie dat echt niet als problemen, als ik dat lees, ervaar ik dat niet als problemen maar als levens van mensen, gewoon levens. Alle mensen hebben verschillende levens en daar komt alles in voor en dat is het."

part to be presented to the young readers. In contrast, Roma (62) finds the entire topic of non-traditional sexual reproduction unsuitable for a young target audience.

Compared to other topics that I explore in this dissertation, it is difficult to identify cohesive trends here in terms of age-dynamics across my relatively small sample of readers. Though some agree and disagree in similar ways, age seems less of a predictor of opinion in this particular instance. Nevertheless, I do think that the variety and the disagreements in readers' responses to *Voor altijd samen, amen* serve as an important example, not only of the messiness of qualitative data, but also the complexity of the reader's response to age norms such as innocence. Maaike herself proposes that her difference in opinion could be explained by her growing up and living in the city: "in a city-context these stories are absolutely not unusual."[109] Thus, while I cannot reduce readers' responses to their age, the arguments themselves add further depth to the broader conversation on innocence as an age norm and how this may shape the lens through which a reader experiences particular characters, but also children's literature in general.

### 3.1.1.1.4 Closing thoughts on innocence and wisdom

I designed my interview-guides with the intent of gathering varied reflections on readers' own age and the age of characters in children's literature. In the course of these interviews, I was struck by just how important innocence and wisdom were as age norms in readers' reflections. Furthermore, readers' use of these age norms touched upon broader theoretical discussions being held in fields like age studies and children's literature criticism, centred on concepts such as aetonormativity and the performance of age.

Among child and adolescent readers, the presence or absence of "knowledge" appeared as a dominant age norm through which characters were aged, but which also served as a mirror through which younger readers reflected on themselves. Nodelman suggests that adult views on the innocent child entail that children "know less about the world they live in than they might, less about how to think about themselves than they might, less about how to behave than they might" (157). If nothing else, my data suggests that some children are distinctly aware of this discourse, and actively play into it through performances of childhood innocence intended to subvert adult disciplinary measures. Moreover, younger readers are able to maintain both a sincere belief that young people do in fact lack knowledge, which is then used to age characters, and a belief that they themselves are more knowledgeable and thus different. This also differentiates the 11-year-old participants from the youngest readers, who did seem to hold the genuine belief that they themselves were indeed lacking in knowledge compared to adults, without an acknowledgement of playing into this for their own benefit. That being said, some younger readers actively demonstrated their own insight into serious topics, grounded in their own

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[109] Original text: "in de stedelijke context zijn deze verhalen helemaal niet uitzonderlijk"

experience, by offering nuanced reflections on characters that forced adult readers to reconsider their views, prompting some adult readers to call these young readers wise.

Meanwhile, adult reflections on innocence and wisdom were grounded in questions of ageism and aetonormativity. Some adult readers linked innocence explicitly to biological age, but not necessarily in a way where the accumulation of the years irreversibly dismantles innocence. Nineteen-year-old Fons, for example, adopted an age-based decline narrative that excludes old adults from "peak" adulthood via a return to childhood innocence, establishing middle-adulthood as the norm. In contrast, older readers emphatically stressed how important wisdom was for their positive experience of old age, and emphasised its entanglement with the aging process. For readers such as Jasper, this in turn became a crucial parameter for aging characters such as Warre and Tine. For some, wisdom was a trait wholly unique to old adults, while others saw it as the direct consequence of experience, which could be had by anyone. This led to significant differences in whether child characters were perceived as wise in the first place, and when they were, whether that wisdom complicated their status as a child or not. These discussions also extended into broader reflections on the role of children's literature vis-à-vis child readers' innocence, with adult readers' thoughts on *Voor altijd samen, amen*'s suitability for its young readership echoing discourse about the role adults should (not) play as the gatekeepers through which childhood innocence is enforced (Kincaid 73; See also Lindgren and Sjöberg 195). My interview data demonstrates that while some adults indeed see a need to be a gatekeeper of knowledge for child readers, this certainly is not true across the board, with some adults lauding *Voor altijd samen, amen*'s potential for introducing difficult topics to children.

The extent to which older readers' positive assessments of wisdom defend aspects that Woodward's analysis deems problematic is striking. Part of the problem, for Woodward, is that rage is an appropriate and valid response to ageist practices against the old. Traditional interpretations of wisdom prohibit rage, which may lead to acquiescence in the face of injustice ("Wisdom" 202). However, in my interviews, older participants valued above all the peace of mind they ascribed to wisdom. Oonis (52) mentioned how her wisdom "has given me peace with what I do and who I am."[110] Sieglinde (59) explicitly contrasts her wisdom with a more emotional youth: "It's different compared to when I was young. I am more accepting of life as it is now, in all its facets."[111] There is – indeed – a level of detached acquiescence in these assessments of wisdom, yet at the same time it is also an age norm old readers took genuine pride in and relied on to create narratives about the aging process which counter metaphors that carry implications of inherent decline.

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[110] Original text: "meer vrede mee heb met wat ik doe en met wie ik ben"
[111] Original text: "ja, het is ook anders dan in mijn jongere jaren. Meer aanvaarding van het leven zoals het is in al zijn facetten."

The affective value that is attached to innocence and wisdom throughout these analyses is complex. The least ambiguous of the two is wisdom, which was broadly perceived as a positive trait to have, with older readers eagerly self-identifying as wise. Innocence was however more complicated. At the least, only the youngest readers saw no issue with self-identifying as lacking knowledge. That does not mean, however, that innocence carried a negative connotation. By and large, it was characterized as a normal, arguably healthy part of childhood. To a degree, the fact that innocence can be both a positive trait *and* one that older readers refuse to self-identify with can be argued to further demonstrate elements of Nikolajeva's argument that we live in an "aetonormative" culture. Currently, wisdom is often perceived as something you acquire with age (Henneberg, "Nexus" 129), while innocence is a state that – while not actively decried – you leave behind after childhood (Reeves 37). As much as children and childhood are celebrated, adult readers appeared to be hesitant to profess they retained a sense of childlike innocence. This offers an interesting contrast with adult readers' views on childhood imagination and fantasy, which I explore in the next section. There, readers were more eager to claim they managed to maintain these traits.

In closing, I want to emphasise that the above discussions emerged as part of a particular dialogue between books, readers and characters. *Iep!*, more so than *Voor altijd samen, amen* seemed to trigger reflections among its readers about innocence and wisdom. There is no clear answer in the data as to why this was the case. One suggestion would be that *Iep!*'s total lack of explicit character ages is significant, and that its third-person narration offers a more neutral ground for age-reflections, compared to *Voor altijd samen, amen*'s eleven-year-old narrator and her own views on age. In other words, the age norms that are triggered among readers do seem to depend on the literature they are exposed to. This leads to further questions about how particular types of children's literature contribute to the shaping of readers' ideas about age. Furthermore, these age norms emerged organically during interviews that were designed to elicit a broad range of responses. It would be both feasible and interesting to develop a line of questioning that puts these concepts at the forefront. Thus, further qualitative research into these age norms could be done by selecting literature and developing interview guides that emphasise these concepts, instead of the more general and spontaneous approach I undertook in this set of interviews.

### 3.1.1.2 *Fantasy and imagination*

As with innocence and wisdom, the concepts of fantasy and imagination were sometimes used to phrase sweeping prescriptive age norms (e.g. "Children have much more fantasy than adults"[112]), but often also operated more subtly in the background of more general reflections, such as Jasmijn's (30) comment that upon seeing a winged girl, children "might think 'is it real? Is that possible? Could someone have wings?' while as an adult you really know that something like that is not possible."[113] In my analysis in this section, I highlight and contrast various dynamics regarding readers' reflections on these topics. However, as with other age norms, readers do not respond to these in a vacuum, instead participating in, or reacting against, broader cultural narratives.

Thus, this chapter will begin with a section on the struggles of defining fantasy and imagination, and a section that places these concepts into a more explicit conversation about age and (children's) literature. Following these two broader explorations of fantasy and imagination, I offer a set of analyses that build further on the ideas outlined in the introductory sections. I begin with two sections on young readers' views, with the first of these exploring questions of didacticism and the need to maintain or lose fantasy/imagination with age; and the second one discussing child readers' views on whether or not adult readers have enough fantasy or imagination to read children's literature in the first place. Then, I explore three co-existing dynamics that emerged among adult readers. This is followed by a final section that focuses on how young readers and adult readers discussed specific characters and their fantasy/imagination.

#### 3.1.1.2.1 Definition issues

One significant hurdle for a coherent discussion of fantasy and imagination is that there is surprising difficulty in laying clear groundwork in terms of definitions. The issue is not so much that they are undefined – there are several available definitions. The issue is rather that the degree of difference between these two concepts is small enough that some consider them identical, others point at minor differences, and some definitions contradict one another. Furthermore, the word "fantasy" is now equally (if not more) often ascribed to specific kinds of literature instead of its readers. While I will touch upon fantasy as a quality of a text, my research focus is the real reader, and I therefore want to emphasize their fantasy most of all.

The OED more or less considers fantasy and imagination to be synonyms. It defines imagination as "the power or capacity to form internal images or ideas of objects and situations not actually present to the senses, including remembered objects and situations, and those constructed by mentally combining or projecting images of previously

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[112] Original text: "Ik denk kinderen zijn veel fantasierijker dan volwassenen." (Joke (27))

[113] Original text: "Voor een kind is dat iets dat nog kan of dat als ze dat zouden zien, dan zouden ze misschien nog denken 'is dat echt, kan dat? Kan iemand vleugels hebben?' Terwijl als volwassene weet je dat dat echt niet kan."

experienced qualities, objects, and situations." It lists "fantasy" as one of its synonyms ("Imagination"). Meanwhile, the OED's first non-obsolete definition of fantasy is "Imagination; the process or the faculty of forming mental representations of things not actually present" ("fantasy").

Fantasy is also included as one of the *Keywords for Children's Literature*, where Deirdre Baker explores the intricate cultural and literary history of that term, starting in the early modern period. On the first page, Baker already establishes a link with imagination, pointing out that up to the late 1700s: "'fantasy,' 'fancy,' and 'imagination' were virtually interchangeable and related not just to the faculty of forming mental representations, but to the way the mind examines and orders those images" (79). This perspective is similar to the one still found in the OED. However, as Baker then points out, somewhere along the nineteenth century, slight differences emerged in how these concepts were interpreted, as anthropologists started to acknowledge "the rich relationship between fantasy, imagination, childhood, and culture" (Baker 82) – with "fantasy" and "imagination" no longer being synonyms but closely related qualities. J. R. R. Tolkien, for example, spends several pages of his 1939 essay "On Fairy-Stories", on clarifying the distinction between the two. He writes how "The human mind is capable of forming mental images of things not actually present. The faculty of conceiving the images is […] naturally called Imagination" (59). In contrast, he proposes "to use Fantasy for this purpose […] which combines with its older and higher use as an equivalent of Imagination the derived notions of 'unreality' […] of freedom from the domination of observed 'fact'" (60). Notably, he clarifies that by "unreality" he refers to "images of things that are not only 'not actually present', but which are indeed not to be found in our primary world at all, or are generally believed not to be found there" (60).

Simply put, instead of being a synonym of imagination, fantasy evolved into something more specific: the capacity to form mental representations of scenes, things and creatures that do not exist in reality, e.g. dragons, unicorns and so on. Thus, for Tolkien, a child daydreaming about playing football, would be an example of imagination, whereas the same child daydreaming about being a powerful sorcerer would display fantasy. The issue is that this distinction was not adopted across the board by everyone writing about this. Children's literature scholar Maria Nikolajeva has, in several works, repeatedly used "imagination" where Tolkien would have used "fantasy." In one text, she defines "imagination […] as an ability for envisioning *supernatural* occurrences within the order of reality" ("Neuroscience" 27; emphasis mine). Elsewhere, she describes child readers as "an audience that has not yet discovered any firm distinction between reality and imagination; that does not dismiss magical worlds and events as implausible" (*Power* 42).

That being said, navigating the slightly fuzzy borders of these concepts is manageable as long as scholars clearly define their own uses of these terms. Often, however, there is an unspoken assumption that the reader will know what the author means when the words

"imagination" or "fantasy" are used, even in cases when a definition would really have been helpful. In Amy Goldstein and Sandra Russ's article "Understanding Children's Literature and its Relationship to Fantasy Ability and Coping", they discuss results from their empirical research with young children. While Goldstein and Russ offer a clearly stated definition of "coping" (108), they essentially leave it up to the reader to piece together what fantasy means for their paper, despite it being one of the core concepts. They measured children's fantasy in part through an exercise where children were "asked to play with two puppets and three blocks for five minutes" (110). This interaction was then ranked on a scale that:

> rates quality of fantasy on three dimensions: organization, elaboration, and imaginativeness. Organization refers to the coherence of the plot in play, elaboration refers to the amount of detail included in the play, and imaginativeness refers to the amount of pretend and novelty demonstrated (110)

In this instance, fantasy is thus used as a catch-all term with no real distinction between the real and unreal.

Through all of this, it becomes difficult to establish a conclusive definition of these concepts. Generally speaking, when a scholar refers to imagination or fantasy without defining these terms, they almost always at least refer to the OED's broad meaning of "forming mental representations of things not actually present" ("Imagination"). Whether or not that includes – or even specifically refers to – "unreal" things depends on the author. Ultimately, my interest does not lie in establishing how these terms should be used, but rather in how they are woven into a tapestry of age norms by readers of different ages in their reflections on themselves and the age of characters. In doing so, readers drew upon and resisted broader cultural narratives that suggest what levels and forms of fantasy and imagination are acceptable at what ages. Thus, in the next few paragraphs, I first explore some of the ways through which fantasy and imagination have been contextualized in academic discourse surrounding literature in general, children's literature research in particular, but also in discussions about age and culture. This will then form part of the backdrop for my analysis of readers' responses. Instead of exploring the minute nuances of each scholar's personal interpretation of fantasy/imagination, I focus on broader arguments, while fully recognizing that if compared in detail, some of these sources offer further contradicting or expanded views on fantasy and imagination.

### 3.1.1.2.2 Age, fantasy and imagination

Critics have long highlighted a link between age, literature, fantasy and imagination, adopting a number of different perspectives along the way. John Gordon, a British writer of children's books, argued that the "boundary between imagination and reality, and the boundary between being a child and being an adult are border country, a passionate place in which to work" (Qtd. in Rudd, "Possibility" 35). While the metaphor of "border country" suggests a closeness between the two – and maybe even the potential for cultural

exchange – the nation of childhood is nevertheless granted imagination as its cultural heritage, whereas the nation of adulthood is granted reality. This premise often returns in a range of scholarly views. Nikolajeva has remarked on the link between childhood and imagination on several occasions, pointing out how there is a "close association of childhood and imagination" (*Power* 61*)* which dates back to the Romantic tradition, and that imagination "is frequently highlighted as a key quality of childness" (Nikolajeva, "Neuroscience" 27).

In developmental psychology, much importance is ascribed to children's changing relationship with imagination and fantasy. Usha Goswami argues that "[t]he development of the imagination […] is core to the development of psychological understanding and social cognition" (Goswami 209). Often, the focus here is on "'fantasy' play" (Gillibrand et al. 354) or "imaginative play" (Wilmshurst 244). These concepts have a long history, with Piaget already discussing "imaginative play" in the 1940s (Piaget 2). When a group of children engages in these kinds of play, they practice several important cognitive skills such as "social referencing (using another person's response to a situation to guide one's own), interpretation of underlying intentions [and] understanding alternative representations of the world" (Goswami 211). More importantly, however, is that this kind of play relies on – and helps fine-tune – a child's "symbolic capacity" (Goswami 211), i.e. their capacity "to 'symbolically' represent something, be it an object or an event, which is absent in their immediate setting" (Gillibrand et al. 354). Lillard et al. offer the example of a child realizing that "a person talking into a banana must be pretending it is a telephone" (289). The age of 15 months to 6-years-old is recognized as an initial crucial developmental period for this symbolic capacity (Gillibrand et al. 354). A second important factor in this development process, is that children cultivate the ability to "quarantine the pretend situation from the real situation" (Lillard et al. 292). This is also discussed by scholars who do empirical work with child participants. Specifically, they point out younger children's "difficulty in separating truth from fantasy" as a defining feature of working with that age group (Daelman 484; see also Hunt, *Criticism* 57). In a nutshell, the ways children engage with imagination and fantasy represent important developmental markers that signal key developments in their cognitive abilities, ranging from the capacity to picture things that are not actually present, to then separating reality from fantasy and imagination. Thus, imagination's reputation as "a key quality of childness", holds true in the way we culturally construct childhood, but also has roots in a child's cognitive development (Nikolajeva, "Neuroscience" 27).

In addition, there is a broader discussion in fields like life course studies and age studies about how our relationship with imagination and fantasy changes as a result of the ageing process. Lorraine Green points out that there are "gains […] as well as losses" related to ageing, and she identifies fantasy as being one of the things one tends to lose as we "become more cognitively expert" ([1st edition] 178-179). The cognitive element is also affirmed by Nikolajeva:

> even in the best of circumstances, a significant part of [fantasy] will be sacrificed during adolescence in favour of other cognitive activities, such as prediction and decision-making, which are often recognised as tokens of maturity. (Nikolajeva, "Neuroscience" 27)

In these arguments, the point is not necessarily that adults lose their "symbolic capacity" (Goswami 211), but rather that, once we have achieved the desired level of cognitive development, our attention shifts elsewhere and we tend to stop engaging in fantasy play. However, fantasy/imagination does not simply dwindle into nothingness over time, and scholars such as Pickard explore the vital role imagination can play in the continued shaping of the ageing process. Specifically, she underscores the importance of nostalgia, imagination and fantasy for how old age stereotypes function and are experienced. Focussing on adverts featuring "old-fashioned grannies with neatly waved white hair, horn-rimmed spectacles and floral pinnies […] or the grandpa featured hard at play with his grandchildren, […] in cowboys and Indians, hula hoops, and other nostalgic games" (192-193), Pickard argues that the presence of these figures in advertising encourages the adult viewer to mentally position themselves as the children in these adverts, thus "reliv[ing] these former times of irresponsibility and playfulness, now long gone" (193). In that moment of imagined reliving, the adult becomes the child being cared for by their grandparents, an act of mental representation grounded in their use of fantasy/imagination. As Pickard summarizes this, these stereotypes exist in: "the realm of story-telling, fantasy, and nostalgia, and it is their presence that conjures up the enchanted gardens in which our (inner) children may play" (193). In other words, it is the adults' imagination that not only allows them to return to an idealized form of childhood in which they were happy, it does this through incorporating and envisioning stereotypes of old age through mentally representing intergenerational interactions between idealized childhood and romanticized old age.

Along these same lines, scholars have also conceived of fantasy/imagination as a bridge between young and old in diverse forms of media, including children's literature. This practice dates back at least to Romantic and Victorian poets and authors such as Wordsworth and Elliot, who stressed childhood "as the wellspring of the imagination" (Natov 31; See also Nikolajeva, *Power* 61). In Wordsworth's case, his work, written for a predominantly adult audience, thematized the continued importance of childhood imagination for adulthood: "Wordsworth leaves the adult reader with what the adult speaker couldn't understand or tolerate – the power and veracity of the child's imagination" (Natov 23).

More recent scholarship emphasizes fantasy in a context of kinship, as something that can be shared by young and old and may lead to intergenerational companionship. As part of their discussion about the relationship between children and the older characters in the tv-show *Mad Men,* Cecilia Lindgren and Johanna Sjöberg remark how: "the relationship

between the two age groups tends to be romanticized, featuring their mutual interests in nature, animals, fantasy, and storytelling" (186). Similarly, when children's books connect childhood and old age, they "do not base their comparison between children and old people on their perceived weaknesses, but on their supposed strengths – creativity, fantasy, curiosity" (Joosen, *Adulthood* 193). Furthermore, beyond being a source of kinship, positive intergenerational interaction in children's literature has also been portrayed as stimulating and engendering the imagination and fantasy of some or all participants of the interaction, including children: "[i]n late twentieth-century children's books […] the close relationship with an older person is usually constructed as being in the child's best interest, fostering his or her agency, emotional strength, and imagination" (Joosen, *Adulthood* 188).

Fantasy and imagination are also important concepts for children's literature research, which regularly discusses their importance for books written for children. The inclusion of fantasy as one of the *Keywords for Children's Literature* is a relatively recent example, but much older texts already indicate its importance. In the early 1970s, Myles McDowell published an article on the "essential differences" between fiction for children and adults (50). It included the reflection that when one attempts to define children's literature "one could go on endlessly talking of magic, and fantasy, and simplicity, and adventure" (51). More recently, Hunt argued that children's literature demonstrates a tension "between the exercise of educational, religious, and political power on the one hand, and various concepts associated with 'freedom' (notably fantasy and the imagination) on the other" ("Introduction" 5). Hunt adds that a society's "concept of childhood" ("Introduction" 5) determines which of the above traits emerges more dominantly in that society's form of literature for young readers. In these arguments, fantasy and imagination are traits that are ascribed to the books themselves. In other cases, fantasy and imagination are ascribed to the readers (of children's literature).

Joseph Appleyard's seminal 1994 work, *Becoming a Reader*, explores how a reader's approach to literature changes over their lifetime, with his description of the child reader heavily emphasizing fantasy. Children, Appleyard writes, "are marvelous fantasists in ways that to adults seem imaginative and creative" (32). For Appleyard, children's fantasy is not just a feature of a phase in their development, it is a fundamental requirement that a human being develops a particular sense of fantasy for them to properly experience fiction. He writes that children younger than 5 for instance, often lack the ability to separate fiction from reality, or struggle to accept that fictional worlds can operate on different rules (50-53). This is that process of "quarantining" that developmental psychologists emphasize as a key step in a child's relationship with imagination and fantasy (Lillard et al. 292). Children's literature, according to Appleyard, is a tool that helps with this exact process, as it enables children to "enter the world of fantasy, discover that they are safe in it and will not be overwhelmed by its inventions, and acquire the confidence to play there" (49).

However, as we age – some critics argue – the relationship between fantasy/imagination and literature shifts. Appleyard identifies a significant change around adolescence. Discussing teenagers for example, he writes that "[a] story is praised because it is 'true,' 'normal,' 'like how people really act,' 'valid,' 'something that's not like a fantasy'" (107). Other reader-response scholars similarly acknowledge that there is a commonly held belief that: "in the early school years children become mainly concerned with the 'real' and reject 'the worlds of the imaginative and the fantastic.' This […] may have contributed to the neglect of literature in the middle years" (Rosenblatt, "Transaction" 273). At the same time, however, these claims bump against the simple reality that the fantasy genre remains incredibly popular in YA and adult fiction. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* perpetually remains in print, and even saw a new spike in sales with the release of the movies in the early 2000s. Likewise, the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* series were tremendously successful, with Stephanie Meyer being the best-selling author in the USA in 2008 (James 76-77). Clearly, even if our relationship with imagination and fantasy changes as we age, plenty of (young) adults remain interested in reading fiction that contains fantasy elements.

In a nutshell, imagination and fantasy operate on a number of levels that entangle questions of literature and age. Ranging from a childhood steeped in playful imagination, to the role of imagination in adulthood's nostalgia for childhood, or as a way to bridge intergenerational gaps. This range of uses translated to a number of different dynamics in the interviews, as readers also reflected on the role of fantasy/imagination in the discussed literature and their own lives. Readers used these concepts in several ways, not only by estimating characters as being specific ages because they displayed fantasy/imagination, but also by reflecting on their own age through those lenses. A general challenge across my research is that readers often did not tend to provide clean, clear-cut definitions of the concepts they invoke, sometimes contradicting themselves or using different terms for similar topics. This was also the case for fantasy and imagination, which seemed to embody somewhat of a nebulous quality for many readers, with some struggling to explain what these words mean beyond identifying instances within the discussed book. Others reflected on fantasy in fairly idiosyncratic terms that did not necessarily align with other readers or critics. For example, I had the following conversation with nine-year-old Louise:

> Leander: When you use the word "fantasy", what do you mean by that?
>
> Louise: Yeah, that it's like different from other things. There are many different characters in the story and I like that. That is using fantasy I think.
>
> Leander: Do you mean that there is variation? That not everything's the same?

Louise: Yeah.[114]

The challenge of navigating these heterogeneous readings is compounded by the additional issue of translating my participants' comments from Dutch to English in a way that correctly conveys their intent. In Dutch, the words "fantasie" (i.e. fantasy) and "verbeelding" (i.e. imagination) exist within a similar balance of being mostly synonyms but not entirely. Consequently, participants often used both words interchangeably. That being said, and despite more unique replies such as Louise's, many readers did reflect on fantasy and imagination roughly along the lines of "forming mental representations of things not actually present" (Baker 79).

### 3.1.1.2.3 Young readers
#### Children's literature and the point of imagination
Participants broadly described imagination and fantasy as traits that belong not only to readers, but also to literature. In my interviews, I asked readers whether they feel that the book they read is suitable for children. Readers of a wide variety of ages reported that *Iep!* was suitable for young readers because it "contained" fantasy or imagination. To offer some examples, 9-year-old Ella said that it "is a good book for children because it has a lot of fantasy,"[115] 41-year-old Moon argued that it was "very suitable because children have a lot of fantasy and there is a lot of fantasy in this book,"[116] 75-year-old Fieke, felt that *Iep!* "contained a lot of fantasy and children can use their fantasy while reading the book."[117] Similar comments were made by Floor (11), Janne (14), Jasmijn (30), Clara (50), Kling (55), Tommy (60) and Margareta (73). This sentiment that the book contains fantasy, which is good for child readers, is thus not strictly tied to readers' age. Rather, among the group of participants who read *Iep!*, it was a broadly accepted position that children possess fantasy/imagination, that the same quality was present in *Iep!,* and that is was thus a suitable book for younger readers.

Among the broad group of readers who commented on the role of imagination and fantasy in children's reading of *Iep!,* every adult participant lauded *Iep!*'s fantasy/imagination as being especially suitable for child readers, because those child readers allegedly possess the same traits. Interestingly, the only criticism that emerged with regard to whether or not imagination and fantasy are desirable for all younger readers were made *by younger*

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[114] Original text:
    Leander: Als je zegt fantasie, wat bedoel je dan met fantasie?
    Louise: Ja, dat het zowat anders is dan de rest zo. Er zijn verschillende personages in het boek en dat vind ik leuk. Dat is fantasie gebruiken vind ik.
    Leander: Dat je zo, dat er verschillende dingen in zitten. Dat alles niet hetzelfde is?
    Louise: Ja.
[115] Original text: "Ik vind het wel een goed boek voor kinderen want het is iets met veel fantasie."
[116] Original text: "[I]k vind het zeker geschikt want kinderen hebben veel fantasie en er komt ook heel veel fantasie in voor."
[117] Original text: "Er zit heel veel fantasie in en kinderen kunnen hun fantasie erin gebruiken."

*readers*. More specifically, a number of younger readers disclosed a preference for children's literature that eschews fantastical elements and sticks to plot-events that they consider to be more realistic and true to life. I discussed the role of fantasy in children's literature with Agamemnon (11), and asked him whether he thought having fantasy was important to properly enjoy children's literature. Agamemnon responded that he does not prefer the books he reads to have a lot of fantasy: "I love [books] without weird stuff. In the *Treehouse* [= the Andy Griffith series] I enjoyed it, all the weird stuff. But in the *Watch* [book by Davide Morosinotto, not yet translated into English] there were no dragons or flying cats and I loved that book. I thought it was awesome."[118] Roughly the same point was made by David (10). He was one of the young participants who read *Voor altijd samen, amen*. As I had done with *Iep!,* I asked readers whether they felt that *Voor altijd samen, amen* was a good book for younger readers. Few readers discussed imagination here, and it was exactly that lack that was identified and commended by David. He replied that *Voor altijd samen, amen* was a good book because: "it teaches you tons of things. In fact I think it's filled with stories that could happen in real life. In other stories you have treasure maps with wooden things. In this book it is plausible that the dad leaves, or that the mom has a new relationship and the father leaves the country. It is all plausible. But finding a treasure map that is never going to happen. So it is actually filled with real stories."[119]

David and Agamemnon both illustrate comments made by reader-response critics on how young readers start to shift away from imaginative, fantasy literature and "become mainly concerned with the 'real' and reject 'the worlds of the imaginative and the fantastic'" (Rosenblatt, "Transaction" 273). Yet, at the same time readers such as Floor (11) and Janne (14) do not just enthusiastically affirm children's general propensity for fantasy and imagination; they also readily admit that they themselves like to read books that contain – and are about – "fantasy." After proclaiming her own love for fantasy in books, Floor neatly defines it as "things that can't happen in real life like someone who can fly like in *Iep!*."[120] This sets her in explicit contrast with David and Agamemnon, illustrating the differences that can exist within the same age group. While my sample is too small to make generalizable claims, David and Agamemnon's position is nevertheless interesting to explore in a broader narrative of children's literature, didacticism, and the role of gender.

In David's (10) case specifically, he grounds his argument for why *Voor altijd samen, amen* is a good children's book in a profoundly didactic framework. I want to stress the

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[118] Original text: "Ik houd zo van-, zonder zo van die rare dingen zo-. Bij de boomhut vind ik dat wel leuk zo. Al die gekke dingen daarin. Maar in het horloge komen daar zo geen draken of vliegende katten in, daar. En ik vond dat echt een kapot boek. Een heel leuk boek."

[119] Original text: "Ja. Je leert er ook van alles van. Eigenlijk denk ik dat-. Het zit vol met verhalen dat eigenlijk ook gewoon in het echt kunnen gebeuren. Zo in andere heb je […] schatkaarten met houten dingen erin. In dat boek, dat kan dat die vader weg is. Die moeder heeft een andere relatie en die vader is uit het land. Dat kan allemaal gebeuren. Maar een schatkaart vinden dat gaat niet gebeuren. Dus het zit vol met echte verhalen eigenlijk."

[120] Original text: "Zo dingen die zo niet echt gebeuren zoals ja zoals bij *Iep!* iemand die vliegt"

spontaneity of that response. There are interviews where I ask participants specifically whether readers can learn something from being exposed to the narrative. However, that is not what I asked David. I asked him whether he thought *Voor altijd samen, amen* was a good book for child readers, and his reply immediately shifted the conversation to the story's potential didactic value. In addition, David finds that fantasy narratives are less capable of imparting a didactic message compared to narratives that are rooted in "real" things. David's comments here are striking in the context of broader discussions in the field of children's literature criticism about didacticism, which also entail questions of imagination and age. I have previously referred to Hunt's argument that in the production of children's literature, there exists a tension between wielding political, educational and religious power through children's literature, and having these books emphasize concepts such as freedom, fantasy and imagination ("Introduction" 5). This is also known as the "famous 'literary-didactic split'", i.e. should children's books be studied as "a work of art or an educational implement" (Nikolajeva, *Approaches* 2). If we envision these two as extremes on a scale, David – and to a lesser extent, Agamemnon – drifts toward educational power as the core feature of children's literature. Although David does not actively deny children's literature's status as art, he determines the quality of a particular work mainly by its didactic messaging, which is rooted in narratives that can happen "in real life". However, this perspective is not necessarily shared by other young readers. To explore this, I want to zoom out a bit and briefly discuss some of the historical nuances of didacticism in children's literature.

Starting from the early days of children's literature production, discussions about didacticism were prevalent, and incorporated comments about the value of imagination and fantasy in children's literature. A number of eighteenth-century educators and writers saw children's literature specifically as a tool to repress fantastical impulses in children, as "progress away from the imagination was progress towards reason and science" (Wilkie-Stibbs 355). In 1796, educator and (children's literature) writer Maria Edgeworth prefaced her stories for children with a brief note to parents that: "[t]o prevent precepts of morality from tiring the ear and the mind, it was necessary to make the stories in which they are introduced in some measure dramatic […]. At the same time care has been taken to avoid inflaming the imagination, or exciting a restless spirit of adventure" (Edgeworth xii).[121] In other words, children were seen as both being in need of moral instruction, and in danger of "inflaming [their] imagination." While the nuances of these discussions have shifted over the centuries (Beauvais, *Time* 109), they remain "one of the central historical discussion points of children's literature", as we are still asking questions such as "How far are Children's Books didactic? And how far are they *necessarily* didactic?" (Hunt, *Criticism* 28; emphasis in original).

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[121] This is taken from the preface to *The Parent's Assistant*, later reprints sometimes contain a shortened preface that lacks this specific quote.

This is also a discussion where gender matters. Christine Wilkie-Stibbs has explored how didacticism in children's literature has a particularly gendered past, pointing out how early writing for children "was dominated by women who […] aimed at the education of children and the regulation of their behaviour" (355), and in this pursuit "feminised the child and the genre" (352). That process of feminisation was rooted in two factors: on the one hand, ideal womanhood at the time changed to make a "woman's role more private and domestic", while also being as "virtuous, modest and moral" as possible, on the other hand, "femaleness also subsumed an educative role" (354). Thus, women were expected to be domestic, modest and moral, but also teachers for the younger generations. Early children's literature was therefore aimed at moulding young readers into this same "virtuous, modest and moral" position. Note how Maria Edgeworth's 1796 preface more or less admits that the main reason her stories for children are dramatic narratives instead of direct virtuous instruction is to "prevent precepts of morality from tiring the ear and the mind" (xii). The narrative becomes the spoonful of sugar that makes the morality go down.

Pickard has suggested that in our modern society it is still the case that "the characteristics that are valued in femininity in many ways evoke a childlike persona. […] By contrast, we can see how masculinity is, in many ways, treated as synonymous with adulthood" (120). A suggestion could be made that the younger female participants feel less pressured to "hide" their imagination because by virtue of being both female *and* young, for better or worse, they exist within overlapping age and gender stereotypes, and are fully allowed to express qualities that are perceived as childlike, compared to David and Agamemnon, who may feel restrictive pressure to enact an adult-oriented form of masculinity. In a perhaps related move, David envisions children's literature in a way that is similar to Edgeworth's preface, as a type of literature that teaches useful lessons, and as part of that enterprise needs to forgo displays of imaginative whimsy that otherwise "inflame[es] the imagination" (Edgeworth xii).[122]

My sample is of course far too small to make definite claims about gender differences. That being said, I do find it intriguing that the two replies that come closest to disavowing fantasy in children's literature are both made by young male participants. Goldstein and Russ encountered a similar result, where – despite also not focussing on gender-based variation – they noted that young boys and girls demonstrate some differences in the ways imagination is expressed (119), though their sample size, like mine, was far too small to make any concrete claims.

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[122] There are some further moments in the interviews that hint at more restrictive views on adulthood among young male readers. Agamemnon, for example, does wield a fairly restrictive perspective on adulthood, at one point commenting that "there are people […] who claim they are adults. But like, they go out partying every week. Yeah that's not really like 'adult' adult." Here, Agamemnon constructs adulthood as a serious, dry affair in which there is no room for play. This view is also not criticized and instead presented as the normal and preferred state of affairs. However, this was admittedly not pursued further in the interviews and is thus conjecture.

## The significance of fantasy and imagination for happiness and intergenerational contact

Shifting back to the interviews as a whole, a broad range of participants of all ages saw the connection between children, children's literature and fantasy/imagination mostly as self-evident. However, once the role of fantasy/imagination was discussed in the context of adult readers, the sentiments shared by the participants became more varied and nuanced. In that regard, some analyses offered by younger readers relayed the belief that "correctly" experiencing children's literature requires the adult reader to have retained access to fantasy/imagination, which is not a given. After discussing *Iep!*'s suitability for young readers with 9-year-old Ella, I shifted the line of questioning to whether the book is suitable for adults as well:

> Leander: And do you think the book is suitable for adults for the same reasons? Or not?
>
> Ella: Yes and no. I think that it's more like a book-. Well also for adults but-. It's so weird to [X] something like that for adults. Yes, but they do have to have [X] fantasy.
>
> Leander: So fantasy is important for you? To enjoy *Iep!*?
>
> Ella: Yes because *Iep!,* a girl that has wings instead of arms that is fantasy so-.
>
> Leander: Would you say that adults have less fantasy than children?
>
> Ella: Some adults.
>
> Leander: Some adults, ok.
>
> Ella: Yes, not all of them. I think that people that are depressed and stuff have less fantasy than people with children for example. Those people have more fantasy by default, I think.
>
> Leander: Would you mind repeating that last sentence? My sound briefly disconnected. I think I understood but I want to make sure.
>
> Ella: That people with children probably have a bit more fantasy. Because of their kids.
>
> Leander: So, the children help adults to have fantasy then?
>
> Ella: That's what I think yeah.[123]

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[123] Original text:

I: En denk je dat op diezelfde manier het boek ook geschikt is voor volwassenen? Of eerder niet?

When Ella finds it "weird" to even think about such a story being suitable for adults, she applies a deficit model of adulthood. To reiterate, we adopt a deficit model if we "take deficiency as our primary metaphor when we think about what it means to be a child" (Gubar "Hermeneutics" 298; see chapter 3.1.1.). However, rather than constructing herself as deficient, Ella envisions the process of aging as one of loss in terms of fantasy, resulting in adults growing increasingly unable to truly enjoy children's literature as it should be. This is also entangled with the specific way in which Ella interprets fantasy. She stresses the unusual, supernatural element above all, and that a lack of fantasy/imagination in adults means that they do not enjoy reading about such creatures. What also struck me, was her strong emphasis on the importance of – and interaction between – happiness and intergenerational contact as part of the process of maintaining fantasy in adulthood. For Ella, childless adults or those suffering from depression are less likely to be able to maintain fantasy as they age.

Ella's perspective adopts several elements of the discourse on imagination and fantasy that I outlined in the theoretical framework. First of all, Ella agrees that "a significant part of [fantasy] will be sacrificed" as part of the aging process (Nikolajeva, "Neuroscience" 27). In making that claim, Ella flips the dynamic found in Joosen's remark that "the close relationship with an older person is usually constructed as being in the child's best interest, fostering his or her agency, emotional strength, and imagination" (*Adulthood* 188). Instead, Ella finds that it is children who foster adult imagination, rather than the other way around. There are other young readers who offer comments that resemble Ella's analysis. In the second focus group conversation about *Iep!,* I asked participants if and how they connected fantasy/imagination to age. After a short discussion by the older readers, 9-year-old Louise added that: "if you have a child, or a small child, you […] still use your imagination for that child. So that you can sometimes also be happy together with that child."[124] Louise's mother was also present in that focus-group conversation, and added in

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P: Ja, en nee. Ik denk dat het dan eerder nog een boek is-. Ja, ook wel voor volwassenen maar-. Dat is zo raar om zoiets voor volwassen [XXX]. Ja, maar dan moeten ze wel [XX] fantasie hebben.

I: Dus fantasie is voor jou belangrijk? Om *Iep!* goed te vinden?

P: Ja want *Iep!*, een meisje dat in de plaats van armen vleugels heeft dat is wel fantasie dus-.

I: En zou jij dan zeggen dat volwassenen meestal minder fantasie hebben dan kinderen?

P: Sommige volwassenen.

I: Sommige volwassenen. Ok.

P: Ja, niet allemaal. Ik denk zo mensen die depressief zijn minder fantasie hebben dan bijvoorbeeld mensen met kinderen. Die hebben sowieso al wat meer fantasie denk ik.

I: Kan je die laatste zin nog eens opnieuw zeggen? Want het geluid viel heel even weg. Ik denk dat ik het wel verstaan heb, maar ik wil zeker zijn.

P: Dat mensen met kinderen waarschijnlijk ook al iets meer fantasie hebben. Door hun kinderen.

I: Ok, dus kinderen helpen dan volwassenen eigenlijk bij het hebben van fantasie.

P: Ja, ik denk zoiets ja.

[124] Original text: "Als je nog wat een kind hebt, of een klein kind hebt. Dat je ook zowat-, nog steeds zowat je fantasie gebruikt voor dat kind zelf. Zodat je zelf soms ook blij kan zijn met dat kindje of zo."

agreement that "you get drawn into the story with your child."[125] The amount of overlap between the two young readers' assessments is intriguing. Just as Ella had done, Louise links imagination and fantasy to intergenerational interaction and happiness. By remarking that adults can "sometimes be happy together with [their] child" through their shared imagination, Louise indirectly constructs adulthood as a less happy period in life. This happiness is then partially retrieved through intergenerational contact.

When I asked 14-year-old Janne whether *Iep!* was suitable for adult readers, she replied: "Less so. Because adults, if I look at my parents [live] much more in reality. Maybe some parents who love Star Wars and stuff, like my teacher. But I think these types of books are much more fun for children."[126] We again find the view that adulthood entails a loss of interest in stories and creatures that are not rooted in "reality." Note that for Janne, parenthood does not automatically entail that one maintains their imagination and fantasy through contact with children. Her own parents are deemed to "live in reality" while her teacher is one of the few adults Janne can think of who might still enjoy *Iep!*, as she knows he likes *Star Wars*. Children's literature such as *Iep!* and science fiction movies such as *Star Wars* are thus put on equal footing by Janne, as cultural products that demand that the consumer does not permanently "live in reality" for them to be enjoyed. Like Ella and Louise, Janne also locates the possession of that trait predominantly in childhood, with adults not being inherently incapable of having fantasy/imagination, but nevertheless struggling to maintain it. Janne (14), being slightly older than Louise (9) and Ella (9), is the youngest participant to think back to her younger days and admit that her relation to fantasy has – at the very least – changed. In her assessment of the characters Bor and Loetje, she described their friendship as follows: "I thought it was a very typical friendship, like they were young kids again. They spend all their time together, they run after each other, and they fantasize together. [...] I used to do that too."[127] Also, while the concept of "fun" is not necessarily identical to "happiness", Janne's comment about the comparatively smaller amount of "fun" adults would find in reading children's literature compared to children, does continue the broader trend of young readers connecting childhood with imagination, happiness or fun, with adulthood being contrasted as a more serious, dry affair centred on "real" things, with little room for imagination.

There are a number of take-aways here. For young readers such as Ella, Louise and Janne, the progressive decline of one's imagination with age is the implicit default. In addition, this is mostly constructed as a sad state of affairs. All three readers recognize that there

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[125] Original text: "Je gaat mee in het verhaal met je kind."

[126] Original text: "Dat iets minder. Want volwassenen, als ik nu kijk naar mijn ouders [xxx] en veel meer in de realiteit. Misschien sommige ouders die wel houden van Star Wars of zo dat kan bijvoorbeeld mijn leerkracht. Maar ik denk dit soort boeken is veel leuker voor kinderen, ik ga daar wel van uit."

[127] Original text: "Ik vond dat echt zo een typische vriendschap eigenlijk zoals kleine kindjes opnieuw. Die zijn de hele tijd bij elkaar, en ze rennen achter elkaar, en ze fantaseren met elkaar. [...] Dat deed ik vroeger ook."

are a select amount of lucky adults who can maintain their imagination, though these are either described as generally being rare, or needing the help of their children to do so. Joosen remarks that children's literature tends to present parenthood and middle age as "dull and stressful stages in life" ("Second Childhoods" 133). This perspective on adulthood seems to be at least partially familiar for Ella, Louise and Janne, who do all appear to share some form of the belief that adults are less capable of having fun, using imagination and thus properly "experiencing" children's literature. This further affirms the interesting contrast between these young female readers, and their male counterparts, who expressed a preference for realistic and didactic children's literature. Instead, Ella, Louise and Janne envision children's literature more as a fun, engaging source of fantasy that adults lose access to.

### 3.1.1.2.4 Adult readers: three co-existing dynamics

This section will shift attention to the adult readers, to explore how they experienced imagination as part of their ageing process, including their comments about the role their imagination played in reading *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen*. The aim here is to examine how adult readers' reflections contrast with – but also supplement and further develop – those made by the younger readers I discussed in the previous section. This section also offers more context for the final part of my exploration of fantasy and imagination, in which I focus on how these perspectives contribute to how characters' ages were constructed.

Among adult readers, there were complex and sometimes contradictory accounts. Generally speaking, no adult participant claimed that their relationship with imagination remained the same over their lifetime. While some did not explicitly comment on this, all adult readers who did, pointed out how they continued to express fantasy/imagination in spite of adulthood's expectations, or alternatively, how they submitted to these expectations and consequently lost (most of) their imaginative/fantastical capacity.

Here, I first want to briefly return to the academic discussion of age, children's literature and didacticism. Within fields like childhood studies and children's literature criticism, there have always been competing notions of how children should be envisioned in the first place. One example is the debate whether a child should be seen as a "being" or as a "becoming", i.e. as "a social actor in his or her own right, who is actively constructing his or her own 'childhood'", or as "an 'adult in the making', who is lacking universal skills and features of the 'adult' that they will become" (Uprichard 304). As Heywood points out, these discussions go back centuries, with "leading figures in the Enlightenment confidently assert[ing] that children are important in their own right, rather than being merely imperfect adults" (Epub). For the first half of the twentieth century, the "becomings" angle used to be dominant. However, since the 1970s, there has been a slow shift towards envisioning children as "beings", or even further as both "beings" *and* "becomings" at the same time (Uprichard 305; Fitzpatrick 44). More recently, there has been a push for

changing the conceptualization of older adults in the opposite direction: "with a new emphasis on older adults as not only *beings* but also *becomings"* (Fitzpatrick 45; emphasis in original). One of the intended goals of this shift is to reaffirm older adults' "right to ongoing access" to personal, intellectual and social growth through formal and informal education (45). These changing perspectives on childhood and adulthood aim to draw the two closer together. For children, it means meeting them on their own ground, as people with their own current desires, problems and contexts which have merit beyond their impact on children's development into future adults. For adults, it means recognizing that they too still change, that adulthood does not mean finality and that as long as we live, we have a personal future. These sentiments align with Gubar's recent call for the adoption of a "kinship model" of childhood, which emphasizes "that children and adults are fundamentally akin to one another, even if certain differences or deficiencies routinely attend certain parts of the aging process" ("Hermeneutics" 299).

This discussion not only ties into the broader discourse of didacticism in children's literature, it also invokes questions about the adult normativity children's literature is sometimes said to display. In *The Mighty Child,* Beauvais explores the cultural dynamics which buttress children's literature's didacticism. Beauvais argues that adults' position of authority, from which their "didactic legitimacy" is derived, is grounded in their perceived "longer time past with its accumulated baggage of experience [and] knowledge" (Beauvais, *Time* 19), while children are represented as embodying a "potent, latent future to be filled with yet-unknown action" (Beauvais, *Time* 19). This essentially overlaps with the "beings or becomings" debate. The validity of adults' "authority" is grounded in them "being" fully shaped through their "baggage of experience" (Beauvais, *Time* 19), while the value of children's "potential" relies on them "becoming" something else later down the line.

Fantasy and imagination are of course not the only concepts that became entangled in that didactic discourse, but they nevertheless have a rich history. As I discussed in the previous section, especially in the early days of children's literature, fantasy and imagination were the targets of this didactic impulse, because a successful, "finished" adult was seen as a rational, grounded human being that has their imagination under control; hence Mariah Edgeworth's pride in her ability to impart a didactic message without stimulating young readers' imagination, or pushing them towards "adventure" (Edgeworth xii). Comparatively, contemporary children's literature's "didactic discourse is […] more prone to trigger conversation than to dictate behaviour" (Beauvais, *Time* 109), and childhood imagination and fantasy tend to be celebrated rather than repressed. Instead of actively avoiding the kindling of imagination, contemporary children's literature is lauded for providing "moral and spiritual guidance for young people, addressing an audience that has not yet discovered any firm distinction between reality and imagination" (Nikolajeva, *Power 42).* Contemporary children's literature is more accepting of the "freedom" of fantasy and imagination than their nineteenth-century predecessors, which expressed

what Hunt called "the exercise of educational, religious, and political power" ("Introduction" 5).

However, Edgeworthian views may still haunt the current state of affairs. While children's imagination and fantasy might be under less direct attack in modern times, society still "others" imaginative children from rational adulthood. Pickard argues that "one of the ways the distinction between young and old is artificially maintained is through use of the civilized rational-body norm" (127), which reinforces not just adulthood as the norm from which childhood (and old age) deviates, but constrains it further to an emotionally subdued, rational adult who neatly fits within Western socio-economical practices. In such a framework, the "becoming" view on childhood is amplified and entangled with an arguably problematic normativization of western cultural perspectives, as the child is "positioned as not yet adult (one of the civilised)" (Rudd, "Possibility" 36) or in even more explicit terms, as "a savage" (Pickard 181; Haynes and Murris, "Philosophising" 293). So, while we have mostly abandoned the sentiment that children need to move away from imagination and fantasy towards reason and fact, that view has arguably been supplanted by a developmentalist perspective that celebrates children's fantasy and imagination, and allows it to exist, but only as a temporary token of immaturity – a sign of one's journey towards "becoming" a finalised adult "being." Joanna Haynes and Karin Murris have argued that this leads to a form of "injustice when children's thinking is side-lined as 'magical', pre-rational and mere fantasy, a form of thinking to be left behind in the process of growing up" ("Philosophising" 299).

This framing of children's imagination and fantasy as more or less acceptable but also a sign of non-adulthood emerges in various forms of media aimed at children and adults. Karen Lury, writing about children in film, remarks that "the child and childhood, and indeed children themselves, occupy a situation in which they are 'other': other to the supposedly rational, civilised, 'grown up' human animal that is the adult" (1). In children's literature, adulthood rationality is also often implicitly seen as the norm from which children deviate. As Beauvais writes: "[a]dulthood is indeed normative, adults do indeed represent children as others, and children's literature does so particularly forcefully" (*Time* 18).

While these discussions tend to focus on the impact this has for children and child readers, adult readers in my interviews also engaged with these broader cultural dynamics. After all, adult normativity does not mean *any* form of adulthood is the norm. A normative view of rational, "finished" adulthood constrains actual adults in the same way as it does children and may clash with real adults who can have their own desires about maintaining childhood traits such as imagination and fantasy, or who may not consider themselves to be a finished "being" and instead wish to reinvent themselves deep into adulthood. In their chapter on old-age stereotypes, Golub et al. remark that: "the expectation that adults over a certain age will (or should) begin to 'act like old people' can become oppressive" (278).

And as John Dirkx notes in his article on adulthood education, there is a "'rationalist doctrine' that pervades most, if not all, formal educational efforts; one that places an emphasis on factual information and the use of reason" (63). He specifically emphasizes the harm this can do to adults in terms of their emotional and imaginative capacity: "adult education reveals a […] tradition of marginalizing emotions and elevating rationality to a supreme position" (67). This diminishes the potential of adulthood, Dirkx adds, because "our understanding of self arise[s] from more than just rational, conscious thought processes" (64-65).

The negative impact of this discourse on adults is also in part why Haynes and Murris rally against the cultural notion that imagination and fantasy need to be left behind in childhood, or has no value for adulthood. One aspect of fantasy/imagination they focus on is animistic thinking, i.e. the "idea that objects are alive, speak and move" ("Philosophising" 296). Haynes and Murris observe that while "literature for children and adults alike often incorporates animalism [sic], children's animistic thinking is often dismissed as 'cute', 'magical' and expressive of a limited and distorted understanding of the world. […] [A]nimism is negatively characterised as 'childish'" ("Philosophising" 297). Yet, as they point out, there are sincere arguments to be made that Western culture's obsession with rational adulthood contributes to a disconnect with nature and our environment. It has "positioned 'us' adult humans as thinkers above or outside the (material) world" (297). To offer an example, adults may dismiss stories with talking animals or plants that represent an "ecological other" (297) out of hand, while these can be a source of connection or understanding with the broader natural world. The culturally enforced suppression of fantasy thus also stifles adult opportunities to engage with certain concepts and ideas.

The dynamics outlined above create a complex tapestry of social pressures that children and adults consciously and subconsciously navigate, and which emerged in the context of discussing *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen* with my participants. Adult readers in particular responded in several ways that explored the same issues from a number of different angles, sometimes complementing one another, but sometimes also offering opposing insights. Below, I want to explore three dynamics I identified among adult readers:

1. Accepting/regretting the loss of imagination and fantasy
2. Identifying/resisting societal pressures
3. Pathologizing imagination and fantasy

I opted to focus on these three dynamics because of their prevalence, their interesting contrasts with one another, and because they are rooted within readers' engagement with various topics that age scholars have also explored in the last few decades, such as the "beings" versus "becomings" opposition.

## Accepting/regretting the loss of imagination and fantasy

I want to start by exploring the reactions of adult readers who struggled with losing imagination along the way of aging into a finished "being." In fact, some saw their loss of imagination or fantasy as their chief regret about being an adult. Ans (33), for instance, offers an interesting reflection on herself, through a reading of one of *Iep!*'s secondary characters. In the Horstel, Warre, Tine and the Rescuer meet an unnamed boy staying there as he needs help with his anxiety. He claims that he "wanted to make something that would change the world […] but it never works" as he is "so afraid of breaking everything" (119).[128] After talking to the Rescuer, the boy promises to make him something to prove that even if it is not perfect, he can push through his anxiety. A few pages later, he presents the Rescuer with a small sculpture he titles: "thoughts" (see below).



The boy's sculpture: "thoughts" (*Iep!* – 133)

Ans' assessment of the age of this character is primarily rooted in the entanglement of his ability to produce this specific art piece and the "openness" of his mind: "[adults] would try to make something that is more finished, [children]'s minds are more open."[129] The art thus becomes an indirect metaphor for children's potentiality and adults' "finished" nature. Like its creator, a child's art can be(come) anything. Meanwhile, Ans feels adults can only produce art that is one, wholly finished, thing.

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[128] Original text: "'Ik wou iets maken waar de hele wereld op wacht,' zei de jongen, 'maar het lukt nooit nergens.'[…] 'Ik ben zo bang dat het breekt.'" (119)

[129] Original text:

[Note: Earlier in the interview, Ans had established that the boy was roughly 10 to 11 years old. This is why I reference this age in this short snippet of the interview.]

P: [volwassenen] gaan als ze iets maken gaan ze dat affer maken.

I: […]En de staat van dit kunstwerk is dan eerder typisch voor 10 à 11 jarigen[…]?

P: Ja die denken nog vrijer.

Later in the interview, Ans reflected that her chief dislike about being her age is that she no longer feels able to produce this type of art: "Things I dislike about being my age? After our conversation I would say that I'm sad that I'll never again be able to make art in the way the boy did."[130] I was particular about translating Ans' Dutch "nooit meer" as "never again." Not only does she state that she is currently unable to produce this type of imaginative art which she links with youth; she offers herself no room for future change that would re-enable this skill. It is lost forever. In other words, she regards herself as a "being", while ignoring any room for further "becoming."

Much in the same way, Jasper (63) also reflected on what he perceives as a loss of imagination, via a reflection on *Iep!*'s Loetje and her fear of stepping on black paving stones. In the book itself, this is a fairly short scene in which Loetje thinks about why she dislikes a particular street:

> There were three black paving stones. There was also a white one, but that one didn't count. The rest were grey. The black ones, she told herself not to walk on, because then a secret hatch would open and she'd tumble down into a cellar filled with ghosts and spirits. (88)[131]

At the end of our interview, I asked Jasper (63) if he had anything to add, or if there were any questions he'd like to revisit. He spontaneously brought up the prior passage and explicitly linked it to didacticism. He remarked that in that passage: "there's that imagination really. If I step on this ooh something bad is going to happen. I'll fall through the floor or something. […] And a little bit later she steps on them […] and doesn't notice. Joke van Leeuwen lets the reader know that 'she stepped on it but didn't fall through.'"[132] I asked Jasper why he thought Joke van Leeuwen wanted to show this to the reader, which prompted a fairly long monologue about the point of didacticism in children's literature, with some interesting overlap with the points I discussed before.

Jasper (63) starts by exploring how he believes childhood fears are grounded in a form of imagination:

> Everyone is scared sometimes and kids, little kids have big fears you know. Like the standard stuff of having ghosts under your bed. […] I was the same when I was a

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[130] Original text: "Dingen die tegenvallen aan mijn leeftijd. Als je daar na het gesprek over nadenkt vind ik het op dit moment wel jammer dat ik nooit meer zo een kunstwerk zou kunnen afleveren als de jongen met zijn gebakken klei."

[131] Original text: "Er waren drie zwarte stoeptegels. Er was ook een witte, maar die telde niet mee. De rest was grijs. De zwarte, daar mocht ze van zichzelf niet op stappen, want dan ging er een geheim luik open en dan viel ze in een kelder met spoken en geesten." (88)

[132] Original text: "Waar zo die fantasie echt, als ik daarop trap dan oeh dan gaat er iets ergs gebeuren. Dan zak ik door de grond of zoiets. Of dan word ik opgeslorpt. En dan een beetje later stapt ze op één maar is ze zo bezig, gefascineerd door andere dingen, misschien in verband met Viegeltje, dat ze het zelf niet merkt. En Joke van Leeuwen ons ergens gewoon laat opmerken, in onze plaats zegt van "ah ja ze is erop gestapt, maar ze is er helemaal niet doorgezakt."

kid. Not literally with black paving stones but with certain patterns. Definitely while I was walking down the street by myself […]. Those kinds of fantasies, they can be very fun and beautiful, but they are part of the same family as those fears. It's a type of imagination that is at play there."[133]

However, after identifying with the character through his own childhood experiences with these fears, Jasper added that, as he grew older, his own fears abated because: "a different phase of my life began."[134] While Jasper felt that *Iep!* was not "overly didactic,"[135] he nevertheless found that its main "point" was to steer children away from irrational fears: "Joke van Leeuwen will of course have thought about that and the example of the black paving stones, that will probably have been a very conscious choice to tell children: 'being scared is okay, but you don't have to be scared.'"[136]

While he recognizes a didactic impulse in *Iep!* that is intended to guide child readers' imagination into a more productive, contained form, Jasper (63) – much like Ans (33) – simultaneously finds himself regretting his own personal loss of imagination, and envisions himself as being truly unable to return to the childhood mindset he was reminded of through Loetje. This was especially noticeable in his response to Warre and Tine, two of *Iep!*'s adult characters. Jasper emphasised how much he enjoyed Warre and Tine as characters but was left frustrated at their apparent ability to be imaginative, an ability which he feels he has lost. When I asked him what adult readers could learn from the story, he replied:

> That I can't actually-. I'm talking about myself now right, about us real adults. Fuck, that I no longer have that quality that we see with Tine and Warre. Or maybe that I still have that but that I don't use it. That I am apparently no longer able to use that.[137]

Thus, there is a small difference between Ans and Jasper's assessments, with Ans reflecting on imagination and fantasy as something she has fully lost, whereas Jasper comments on it more in terms of lost access to something that is still fundamentally there. Nevertheless,

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[133] Original text: "Iedereen is wel eens bang en kinderen, kleine kinderen hebben grote angsten hé. Zo de standaarddingen hé van spoken onder je bed. […]Ik heb dat als kind ook gedaan. Niet letterlijk met zwarte tegels maar zo bepaalde patronen. Zeker bij het alleen over straat stappen. […] Dus ja, dat soort fantasieën, die heel plezant en mooi kunnen zijn maar die zijn familie ook van die angsten hé. Dat is een soort verbeelding dat daar in het spel is hé."

[134] Original text: "maar allee ja, dan begint er een ander stuk van mijn leven bij wijze van spreken"

[135] Original text: "Dit is geen belerend boek hé."

[136] Original text: "Dat Joke van Leeuwen daar natuurlijk wel over nagedacht zal hebben en dat voorbeeld van die zwarte tegels dat dat wel ja, allicht heel waarschijnlijk heel bewust iets zal hebben van: 'je mag bang zijn, maar je moet niet bang zijn'"

[137] Original text: "dat ik eigenlijk, ik heb het nu over mezelf he, maar over de echte volwassenen he. Fuck dat ik niet meer zo die kwaliteit in mij heb van bijvoorbeeld Tine en Warre. Of misschien nog wel in mij heb van natuurlijk heb ik dat, maar dat ik daar niks meer met doe. Dat ik er toch niet meer echt toe in staat ben om dat te gebruiken."

Ans and Jasper both reflect on imagination and fantasy as qualities that are somehow unavailable to them in a way that is connected to their age.

Uprichard points out that when the cultural discourse around age envisions children purely as "becomings", and adults strictly as "beings", we end up with children "who seemingly cannot be competent at anything, [and] adults who are seemingly competent at everything!" (305). However, Jasper (63), Ans (33) and younger readers like Ella (9) disrupt such discourses by playing into a sense of "lost" imaginative capacity. These readers implicitly offer a counterpoint to the insistence of early educators that "progress away from the imagination was progress towards reason and science" (Wilkie-Stibbs 355). There is an atmosphere of questioning adult rationality that governs Jasper and Ans' apprehensive reflections on adulthood's losses. They may see themselves as finished "beings", but that is not a completely positive experience, as it is accompanied by their sincere regret of being incapable of reacquiring their fantastical ability. In a way, they feel cut off from some part of themselves. They are limited to engaging with a "cultural symbol" (i.e., children's literature, art,…) mostly through "rational, conscious thought processes" (Dirkx 64-65). That being said, this does not seem to fundamentally prohibit their enjoyment of the book, with Jasper in particular sharing his love for *Iep!*.

### Identifying/resisting societal pressures
However, not all adults claimed to have fully lost imagination, and an interesting difference was noticeable between early-adult readers and some of their older counterparts. Multiple early-adult readers commented on the social pressures that surround adult rationality. In 27-year-old Joke's reflection, she initially states that "children have so much more imagination compared to adults", but quickly rephrases and adds:

> Well, they are allowed to have imagination I should say. Having a lot of imagination is useless as an adult [laughs] well it's a weird way of putting it perhaps. But with children it's much more, yeah, perceived as something positive. So, I'd say, children have much more imagination than teenagers, and teenagers still have just that bit of extra imagination compared to adults.[138]

28-year-old Helena offered a similar reflection and partially blamed portrayals of adulthood and childhood in fiction: "it is the way children are portrayed. I don't think adults are incapable of having imagination but that they are just not often portrayed as such."[139] Similarly, Jasmijn (30) shares that as an adult "it's also just not expected of you as

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[138] Original text: "Ik denk kinderen zijn veel fantasierijker dan volwassenen, allee dat wordt misschien meer toegestaan zal ik dat zeggen, allee met veel fantasie ben je als volwassenen niet zoveel precies (lacht) dat is zowat raar uitgedrukt, maar bij kinderen wordt dat nog veel meer, ja, als iets positief of zo ervaren en dus dan zou ik zeggen, kinderen zijn veel fantasievoller of rijker dan jongeren en jongeren zijn dan nog net een beetje fantasierijker dan volwassenen."

[139] Original text: "Ik denk wel dat dat de manier is waarop dat kinderen worden afgebeeld. Ik denk niet dat volwassen geen fantasie kunnen hebben maar dat die vaak niet zo worden getoond."

much that you show imagination,"[140] though she also shifts into a more fundamental, developmental difference between childhood and adulthood by remarking that we "lose much of our imagination as part of the aging process."[141] In that sense, she characterizes imagination as a skill that you lose both from lack of practice when the social expectation of childhood imagination is dropped over time, and via a developmental process, i.e. you grow out of it.

Middle-adult participants also recognized these same societal pressures which inhibit fantasy as part of the aging process. Boris (49), for instance, suggests that one of the reasons children lose their imaginative capacity over time is because of "adults who say 'no that is impossible" in response to children's expressions of imagination.[142] However, in contrast to early-adult readers, several middle-adult readers characterized themselves as an exception, i.e. as a rare adult who loves imagination and has successfully maintained it into adulthood. Moon (41) participated in one of the focus group conversations. There, she reflected that she does not think that adults cannot have imagination, but rather that "we start learning early on not to use our imagination. I think children are much more free in that regard."[143] Earlier, in my individual discussion with Moon, she shared that "adults in general may struggle more to jump into that fantasy world. Personally, I generally don't find that too difficult."[144] On a similar note, Boris (49) remarked that: "there are a lot of adults who believe that fantasy is not that important. I myself find it to be super important. […] I have a pretty vivid imagination myself."[145] This view was shared by readers in their fifties and early sixties. For example, Kling (55) reflected on how she finds it "important that our imagination is stimulated regardless of our age. […] I absolutely appreciate that. […] Maybe a lot of [adults] should do that [= read children's books] once in a while. Just so they know not to take life too seriously."[146] Similar comments were made by readers such as Clara (50) and Tommy (60).

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[140] Original text: "Het wordt ook meer, allee ja, minder van u verwacht dat ge heel fantasierijk rond iets denkt denk ik dan."

[141] Original text: "Nee, dat is wel naar mijn mening [lacht] is dat wel zo. Dat je fantasie een heel stuk verliest met ouder te worden."

[142] Original text: "ook door misschien volwassenen die dat zeggen van: 'nee dat kan niet dat kan niet'"

[143] Original text: "Ik denk niet dat volwassen mensen minder fantasie hebben maar ik denk dat we wel leren-, eigenlijk al redelijk vroeg beginnen leren van een bepaald deel van onze fantasie niet te gebruiken. En ik denk dat kinderen daar toch veel vrijer in zijn."

[144] Original text: "Ik denk dat volwassenen misschien wel meer moeite hebben over het algemeen om in die fantasiewereld mee te gaan. Persoonlijk heb ik daar over het algemeen genomen niet zoveel moeite mee."

[145] Original text: "Ik denk dat er ook veel volwassenen zijn die vinden dat die fantasie niet zo belangrijk is. Ik vind dat zelf superbelangrijk. […][I]k heb zelf wel nogal een levendige fantasie."

[146] Original text: "Ik vind het wel belangrijk dat de fantasie op eender welke leeftijd af en toe wel een keer geprikkeld wordt. […] [M]isschien zouden veel mensen dat af en toe ook eens moeten doen [lacht] om het leven wat minder serieus te vinden op tijd en stond."

Compared to Ans and Jasper, these readers do not connect imagination and fantasy categorically to age. Instead, they share an explicit awareness of the social pressures and expectations that may lead someone to drop imagination and fantasy as they age. Because of this awareness of the social aspect, imagination and fantasy are also constructed as recoverable – in contrast to Ans and Jasper's belief in the permanent irretrievability of their imagination. As a result, this perspective also seems to contain more hope and personal happiness. Compared to Ans and Jasper's sadness at losing access to imagination and fantasy, readers like Moon emphasize their own pride at being able to maintain imagination and fantasy in the face of social pressure.

### Pathologizing imagination and fantasy

Finally, there is a third group for whom the continued possession of imagination and fantasy in (old) adulthood is framed in a context of psychological and mental health. By the "pathologization of imagination and fantasy", I refer to views that contextualize continued possession of imagination and fantasy in adulthood as a (psychological) health issue. Notably, the only two readers who explicitly positioned themselves in this discourse, were some of the oldest readers I interviewed: Margareta (73) and Fieke (75). Margareta reflected extensively on this topic, while Fieke offered a shorter reflection. During our individual interview, I asked Fieke (73) whether she felt *Iep!* was good for an adult audience. She replied that she enjoyed it but would not want to read another one in the same style, then she continued: "Maybe-, never mind I'm not saying that,"[147] followed by laughter. I pressed her on what she wanted to say, and she replied: "I think it's an amazing book to give to people who are no longer fully-. Who-. I'm being very serious right now. Who have dementia or similar issues. I think it's an amazing book for those people because they might be able to once again use their imagination with such a book."[148] In other words, Fieke does not envision a return of imagination as the inevitable consequence of the ageing process. Instead, she is adamant that only "certain older people will read those books with great pleasure because they can return to their childhood."[149] Her view is more grounded in uncertainty about how well her mind will hold up to the threat of deep old age. Despite stating firmly that while she liked *Iep!,* she had no interest in reading any other children's book, Fieke nevertheless added that she is uncertain whether that will still be the case in the future, hinting at her own potential future struggles with dementia.

Fieke's (75) comments on dementia are particularly interesting in light of the connection between old age and childhood that sometimes emerges in the way these age groups are

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[147] Original text: "misschien-. Nee ik ga het niet zeggen."

[148] Original text: "Ik denk dat dat een fantastisch boek is voor aan mensen te geven die niet volledig niet meer-. Die die-. Nu ben ik echt wel heel serieus hé. Die dementerend zijn of zoiets. Ik denk dat dat een fantastisch boek is voor zo een mensen. Omdat die terug ja, misschien hun verbeelding heel goed kunnen gebruiken met zo een boek."

[149] Original text: "Bepaalde oudere mensen die boeken wel met alle plezier lezen. Dat die terug naar hun kindertijd kunnen gaan."

culturally constructed. Earlier in this thesis, I reflected on the "innocence parabola" proposed by participant Fons (19). This parabola visualized the shared othering of old age and childhood from middle-adulthood, which is also positioned as the norm to which childhood and old age are compared (Pickard 78; Joosen, *Connecting* 6). A slightly different but related cultural construct, is that of old age as a "second childhood" (Woodward, "Wisdom" 195; see also Van Lierop-Debrauwer 86). In such a perspective, "older people are often expected to act more like children" (Golub et al. 278). Fieke's assessment that only "certain older people" can "return to their childhood" because they suffer from dementia adds an interesting nuance, in which old age in and of itself does not constitute a return to childhood. Instead, Fieke connects a particular kind of "senility with infancy" (Woodward, "Wisdom" 195). It is not old age but the specific affliction dementia, which affects some but not all older people, that allows someone to "return to their childhood" and its associated qualities of imagination and fantasy.

The emotional component of Fieke's analysis is complicated. Dementia is clearly not a happy subject, and Fieke explicitly introduces the topic by stating that she "is being very serious right now."[150] At the same time, the way she envisions the book being particularly engaging for people with dementia also involves a level of comfort and care. There is no negative or dismissive attitude about these people being "childish." Instead, she argues that it would be a good tool "to have conversations with [them]"[151] and that they would have "fun"[152] with it. Ultimately, Fieke's view on imagination and fantasy is that these traits are difficult to recapture in old age, but that they are more accessible for people who suffer from dementia. This is not discussed with derision, but as a silver lining in which the kind of ailments that are associated with the aging process come with the benefit of once again allowing certain older people to engage more sincerely with children's literature.

During my interview with Margareta (73), I asked her if there was anything in the book she particularly related to. Margareta replied that she connected strongly to Loetje's imagination: "yes, the imagination, I related to that quite a bit. Imagination in the sense of 'gosh I wish I could fly', or [...] what I also recognized was her fear of falling in a deep hole if she stepped on the black paving stones."[153] I was intrigued by her emphasis on imagination, and asked her whether that had been a general presence throughout her life or whether it had mostly been relegated to specific periods. She added: "Yeah when I was seven of course [laughs] [...] I was cured from such thoughts [laughs]. Otherwise it'd need

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[150] Original text: "Nu ben ik echt wel heel serieus hé"
[151] Original text: "er eens met die mensen over te babbelen"
[152] Original text: "plezier"
[153] Original text: "Ja, die fantasie, daar kan ik mij wel in vinden. Fantasie van 'goh, als ik nu kon vliegen' of [...] wat ik ook nog terug herkende dat was dat ze zei dat ze op een zwarte steen niet mocht trappen want dat ze dan de dieperik inging, dat herken ik."

to be fixed by a psychiatrist or psychologist."[154] Thus, although it seemed important for Margareta to affirm that she believes imagination to be fundamentally good, and that she had imagination in the past, her hypothetical continued possession thereof would be akin to a mental health crisis that needs to be "cured" by a mental health professional. This need to stress her adulthood whilst emphasizing her abandonment of "childish" things returned in our second interview, where we reflected on her experience of participating in the focus group conversation. In this second interview, she reiterated her fondness for the imagination demonstrated by Loetje: "because she retreats into her own world. If I think back to my childhood, I did that too. I crawled deep under the table with my book so that they couldn't find me. […] And I kept reading and living in my own fantasy world. As a child of course."[155] Note how she makes the same three-step-argument in both interviews: imagination was an important trait she possessed in childhood, this serves as a source of connection to Loetje, but she is adamant that at her current age she is beyond such things.

However, Margareta (73) simultaneously openly criticizes others of her age for *lacking imagination*. During the focus group conversation in which Margareta participated, Louise (9) remarked that "if you have a child, or a small child, you […] still use your imagination for that child."[156] In response to that comment, a different participant – Helena (28) asked Louise whether she felt that older childless people are lacking in imagination. Here, Margareta quickly interjected that "there absolutely are older people that no longer have imagination. Would you like a list?"[157] Margareta expanded on this remark by sharing that she felt that with age, demonstrations of imagination slowly become no longer socially acceptable for older individuals. She added that "older people no longer dare to express their imagination" because the concept of imagination is co-opted by those who wish to belittle and downplay comments made by older adults. She then proceeded to offer a number of examples of the comments she and others of her age receive: "Yeah people are quick to go: 'gosh they're fantasising again aren't they.' That's something we hear sometimes as adults. Or like 'that can't happen you know.'"[158] Yet, despite explicitly calling this out as something she dislikes about the way older adults are treated, she almost verbatim used the same remark in response to Louise (9) during a conversation about the character Loetje. When Louise suggested that Loetje's treatment at the hands of her father could perhaps be explained by her being an orphan adopted by the story's father figure,

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[154] Original text: "Ja, ja als ik zeven jaar was ook hé. [lacht] […] Ik ben daar van genezen hoor. [lacht] Dat is iets voor een psychiater of een psycholoog." [lacht]

[155] Original text: "Omdat die zo wegdroomt in haar eigen wereld en ja. Die trekt zich daar zowat uit terug. En als ik zo aan mijn eigen kindertijd denk, ik deed dat ook. Ik kroop met mijn boek onder tafel heel ver weg dat ze mij niet direct konden vinden. […] [I]k bleef daar lezen en ik leefde in mijn fantasiewereld. Als kind hé."

[156] Original text: "Als je nog wat een kind hebt, of een klein kind hebt. Dat je ook zowat-, nog steeds zowat je fantasie gebruikt voor dat kind zelf."

[157] Original text: "Er zijn er die absoluut geen fantasie meer hebben. Moet je een lijst hebben?"

[158] Original text: "Je wordt direct terug: 'zeg maar ze zijn aan het fantaseren hé'. Dat is toch een antwoord dat je als volwassene soms wel krijgt hé. Zo van 'zeg dat kan nu toch niet hé' zo."

Margareta immediately replied: "oh now she starts fantasizing."[159] The comment was said cheerfully and was clearly not intended to be hurtful or disrespectful, but it is striking how closely it echoes the very same sentiment Margareta had derided just slightly earlier as an example of the dismissive comments used by younger adults to mock older adults' displays of imagination.

Margareta (73) and Fieke (75) both seem to rely heavily on adult normativity in their reflections. Margareta stresses on multiple occasions that while she was a highly imaginative child, those days are now over, going as far as claiming that psychological help would be required if she had maintained this trait in adulthood. In doing so, she not only shows a belief in "adulthood as the normal and preferred state of being" (Gubar, "Hermeneutics" 297), her idealized (old-) adulthood entails a fairly restrictive and regulated set of attributes. However, at the same time, she openly laments that people of her age don't have imagination anymore while pointing out that middle-adults downplay older adults' remarks by describing it as "fantasizing." Meanwhile, Fieke sees ailments such as dementia as a potential way for imagination to return in old age. Neither outright condemns imagination and fantasy as problematic, but both restrict it to the territory of children and childhood.

### 3.1.1.2.5 Imagination and fantasy as windows into a character's age
To introduce this section, I first want to briefly turn to Tandoi's research on young readers' responses to David Almond's *My Name Is Mina.* The novel's main character Mina does not fit in the regular school system for a number of reasons. A significant one is her irrepressible urge to express her creativity and imagination in school assignments, where this is deemed inappropriate by her adult teacher. As the synopsis on the back cover of the Dutch translation puts it: "[Mina] is brimming with ideas and discoveries, but her fantasy sometimes gets her into trouble."[160]

Tandoi's interviews with ten- and eleven-year-old readers suggest that they do not necessarily identify with Mina, and that this lack of identification is – at least to some extent – rooted in their view of her particularly imaginative mind. Tandoi quotes a child named Francis, who argued that the book is "kind of like part of the life of a crazy person. […] It's just telling the story of how a crazy—I mean ah, a different mind works" ("Negotiating" 85). Another reader by the name of Dahlia remarks: "Sometimes I think about what she says and what it means. When I think and think about it, it seems pointless. There's nothing really good about Mina" (85). Some young readers extend this analysis to

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[159] Original text:

  Louise (9): "Misschien is het wel een weeskindje? En hebben ze dat gewoon niet verteld in het boek?"

Margareta (73): "Oh nu gaat ze wel fantaseren."
[160] Original text: "Nina bruist van de ideeën en ontdekkingen, maar haar fantasie brengt haar soms ook in de problemen"

the author; one boy argued that, based on how Mina is characterized and the story is written, "he could 'see the author in an insane asylum' because 'it [*My Name Is Mina*] is just weird'" (84). I find these responses striking because they illustrate how these younger readers already have a normative sense of who should have imagination at what point in their lives and to what extent. Mina as a character is perceived as excessively strange to the point that the author's sanity is questioned as both character and author are deemed mentally unwell and abnormal. While the claim that Almond may belong in an insane asylum is obviously made in jest, it carries significant normative weight and shows that at relatively young ages children are aware of discourses surrounding mental health and the institutionalization of those who do not outwardly present as neurotypical. So, while my own interviews suggest that (some) young readers stress their own imagination as a positive element that enables them to truly enjoy children's literature, Tandoi's research suggests that readers of roughly the same age can also consider imagination in fictional characters to be excessive to the point that it is pathologized.

I bring this up for several reasons – first of all, the institutionalization of those with excessive imagination is an explicit plot point in *Iep!*, with Warre, Tine, the Rescuer and Loetje being semi-voluntarily held in the Horstel because the employees there do not believe their claims about a half-bird half-human hybrid girl existing. Furthermore, the Horstel is where the reader meets Bor, who has been sent there by his parents for his paralyzing fear of ghosts. While the topic of imagination-as-mental-illness was spontaneously introduced by Tandoi's readers of *My Name Is Mina, Iep!* actively incorporates it as one of the themes its characters deal with. Consequently, readers across the age spectrum adopted interesting positions in this conversation. Most attention here was paid to Bor and Loetje's belief in ghosts and Viegeltje respectively, with many readers pointing to this as examples of fantasy/imagination and drawing a comparison between the two characters. In these analyses of Bor and Loetje, there are both interesting echoes and divergences from Tandoi's research to be found in the reactions of younger *and* older participants. Throughout all of this, the view on characters and their fantasy/imagination is embedded within questions that were already touched upon in prior sections: is imagination the same in youth and old age? How does imagination evolve with age? If imagination is a trait belonging to youth, is it admirable or problematic if an older person is shown to still possess it? Can children (and adults) have "abnormally" intense levels of imagination? Should attempts be made to "treat" the imagination of "abnormally" imaginative individuals? And so on. In discussing these topics, I will once again start by focusing on the younger readers, and then move on to adult readers.

### Child readers: fantasy, believing the (un)real and the suspension of disbelief
I want to explore Louise's (9), Floor's (11) and Janne's (14) replies first. They were the young readers who most prominently discussed imagination and fantasy in the context of characters, whereas the other young readers tended to use these concepts to reflect on themselves or children's literature more broadly. What set these young readers apart the

most, was a tendency to characterize Bor's belief in ghosts as problematic. This view was rooted in two things: 1) their previously established view of fantasy as something that "normally" dissipates with age; and 2) a widespread emphasis on their own personal ability to distinguish real from unreal, which they contrasted with young people in general and characters such as Bor.

This second aspect tended to operate in the background of readers' reflections. I want to briefly highlight this via three moments from my interview with Floor (11). First, Floor (11) defined fantasy as "things that cannot happen in real life like someone who can fly like in *Iep!*"[161] Later, she adds that when children (she mentions no specific age) read the book, they will "think that there really are people who can fly."[162] Finally, when I asked her if *Iep!* would have something to offer to adult readers, she replied: "I think adults won't be that interested. […] I think older adults will know that you can't fly. While children don't know that so well."[163] These three statements interact in an interesting way because Floor implicitly excludes herself from childhood via her own definition of fantasy. She indirectly acknowledges that she herself knows that flying people are *not* real – and, for Floor, one key mark of adulthood is an awareness that people cannot really fly, which children lack.

That same core argument also became apparent in other young readers' view on Bor – where the point does not only revolve around him spending a lot of time fantasizing about ghosts, but also that his belief in them is *sincere*, i.e. he believes they *really* exist. This interacts with how his age is constructed by young readers, through their perception that growing up means first gaining awareness that imagined/fantasized things – though enjoyable – are unreal, before losing imagination altogether as you continue to age. Following that line of thought, young readers hinted that what Bor demonstrates is not necessarily indicative of prolonged childhood imagination, but rather a mental health problem/issue. Thus, they agree with the Horstel's doctors. During my interview with Louise (9), she suggested that the *core and only* message of the book is that children "shouldn't be scared of ghosts because Bor had to go to the [Horstel] for his thoughts and stuff and he was always thinking about ghosts. But that's all I can find in the story."[164] Moreover, I asked her why it was an issue that Bor thought about ghosts, to which Louise replied "they don't exist."[165] In a way, Louise thus aligns herself with the story's adult doctors in a metatextual sense, feeling that *Iep!* – as a narrative presented to child readers – has similar goals as the treatment Bor is receiving, i.e. the management and inhibition of

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[161] Original text: "dingen die zo niet echt gebeuren zoals ja zoals bij *Iep!* iemand die vliegt."

[162] Original text: "kinderen […] als ze dat boek gaan lezen zo dat leuk vinden en denken dat er ook zo echt mensen bestaan die kunnen vliegen."

[163] Original text: "Ik denk dat dat hun niet zo interesseert.[…] Ik denk dat oudere volwassenen wel weten dat je niet kunt vliegen. Terwijl kinderen dat niet zo goed weten."

[164] Original text: "dat ze niet bang moeten zijn voor spoken want de jongen Bor die moest naar een soort hotel, en dat was daar een helphotel voor wat je denkt en zo en die dacht altijd aan spoken. Maar dat is eigenlijk het enigste in het verhaal, dat ik vind."

[165] Original text: "Die bestaan niet."

unrestrained imagination. If any young reader maintains the same belief in ghosts, *Iep!* – according to Louise (9) – may help them dispense with such notions.

It is interesting to point out here the ways in which the "lesson" Louise identifies clashes with adult reader Jasper's (63) perspective. Both readers identify an intent on the book/author's part to modify (child) readers' engagement with imagination. Jasper (63) remarks that he "wouldn't fully say that it is Bor who thinks or fantasizes all of this. It is Joke van Leeuwen who does, and allows us to think, watch and read with her. And makes us fantasize. Whether we like to or not."[166] Where Louise (9) identifies a restraining message, more or less summarizeable as "ghosts do not exist, stop believing in them or you might have to go to a Horstel-like place to get it fixed", Jasper envisions the opposite, the story is intended to spark imagination, even in adult readers who may otherwise struggle with this.

Janne (14) adopted a view similar to Louise's (9) – also explicitly framing Bor's belief in ghosts as a problem that he needs to solve and overcome, i.e. the view of Bor's parents and the adult doctors: "Bor had so many problems of seeing ghosts and spirits."[167] However, what stands out in Janne's analysis, is that Loetje's imaginations/fantasies birthed from her interactions with Viegeltje are explicitly referenced as less of an issue: "Loetje was like 'I would like to be a bird', but I thought that was less of a problem compared to Bor and I also thought those things when I was a child."[168] Following this, she adds "I think that [Loetje] was a bit younger."[169] Her past tense reference to "when I was a child", and her explicit construction of Loetje as younger than Bor intrigued me, so I asked Janne to expand on this view. She explained that unrestrained imagination that entails believing something impossible to be true, is not problematic, and even normal when you are younger, but becomes problematic as you grow older: "I know that that is not reality. A girl with wings. Yeah that is a bit logical I think. […] 12 and 13-year-olds they'll definitely know that Viegeltje cannot exist. Maybe 9- and 8-year-olds wouldn't. And they would actually believe it."[170] So, Janne's "aging" of these characters not only hinges around whether or not their belief in something unreal is perceived as problematic by the adults in the story, that adult perspective is also accepted as correct: it *is* a problem that Bor still believes in ghosts *because* he is older than Loetje. Furthermore, like Louise (9) and Floor (11), Janne (14) finds it necessary to emphasize that in contrast to Bor (or in Louise's case –

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[166] Original text: "Ik zou zelfs niet voluit zeggen dat Bor het is die dat denkt of dat fantaseert. Dat is Joke van Leeuwen die dat zegt, en dat ons mee laat denken, ons daar laat naar kijken en ons dat laat lezen. En ons daarbij laat fantaseren. Maar dat we zelf willen of niet willen."

[167] Original text: "Bor die had nog heel veel problemen van eigenlijk spoken en geesten te zien."

[168] Original text: "En Loetje had wel zoiets van "ja ik wil wel een vogel zijn" maar dat vond ik een minder erg probleem als Bor en dat had ik ook eigenlijk als kind."

[169] Original text: "Ik denk ook gewoon dat die iets jonger was."

[170] Original text: "Ik weet nog altijd dat dat geen realiteit zou zijn. Een meisje met vleugels. Ja dat is een beetje logisch denk ik dan […] kinderen- voor 12 jaar en 13-jarigen zouden die al sowieso weten dat Viegeltje niet echt zou bestaan. En misschien van 9 en 8 wel. En dan zouden die dat echt geloven."

children in general) she herself is perfectly aware that Viegeltje/ghosts are not real things. Or in her words, it is "logical" that something like that cannot exist.

In a similar vein, the one thing that made Floor (11) reconsider whether Loetje could be older than Bor, is Loetje's lack of belief in ghosts. Floor initially estimated Loetje to be roughly 8 years old with Bor being slightly older. Following this assessment, this conversation took place:

> Leander: Would you say she behaves like the average 8-year-old? Or does she act older or younger sometimes?
>
> Floor (11): A bit older sometimes.
>
> Leander: In what way?
>
> Floor (11): You know that moment when Bor says like yeah he thinks sometimes that ghosts exist and stuff. Loetje then says like 'no those absolutely do not exist'[171]

Thus, young readers estimate Loetje and Bor's ages at least in part through their display of fantasy/imagination on the one hand, and their (un)awareness that imagined things are unreal on the other hand. What struck me was that no young reader really took Bor's side in all of this. Janne (14) and Louise (9) in particular aligned themselves with the Horstel's adult doctors in perceiving Bor's belief in ghosts as a problem that needs to be treated. Beneath these young readers' analyses, two questions emerged. At what age does sincerely believing in ghosts/Viegeltje shift from a normal part of childhood to mental illness? And perhaps more importantly, what does this apparent growing awareness of the "unreality" of fantasized/imagined things mean for "childhood" and "adulthood" as concepts?

The significance of "pretending" for fantasy and imagination as concepts is interesting to point out here. Joseph Appleyard, remarking on the connection between cognitive development and the role of fantasy in children's play, writes that "as soon as children can do this, they delight in it, pretending, like Carol, that the living room furniture is a train she is driving" (33). Similarly, Lowe reports how the children she observed and interviewed were not only "pretending to be adults" (272) as part of their play, they were also distinctly aware that that was what they were doing (they call it "'tending") *and* that playing in this

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[171] Original text:
Leander: Zou je zeggen dat [Loetje] zich gedraagt zoals de gemiddelde, zoals de meeste 8-jarige kinderen? Of dat ze soms iets ouder of iets jonger gedraagt volgens jou?
Floor (11): Iets ouder soms
Leander: Op welke manier?
Floor (11): Zo op de moment dat Bor zo zei van ja dat hij soms denkt dat er zo spoken en zo bestaan en ja. Loetje dan zei van "nee dat bestaat helemaal niet."

way distinguishes them from real adults. When Lowe attempted to join the children in their play, a concerned child offered this comment:

> "No, cos the playing bit is not for grown-ups, you … you … you could help us, you wanna do that?' (said seriously, while affectionately rubbing the researcher's arm). A second child joins in saying: 'Yeah you say the story and we do it, we do 'tending [sic] bit." (274)

Lowe relates how a child participant impressed upon her an awareness that "adult play is not about imagination" adding the comment that "on a number of occasions the children laugh at the researcher and check it is understood the situation is only pretend" (274). Crucially, Lowe's participants were 3 to 4 years old, significantly younger than the youngest participants I interviewed. Nevertheless, they too found it necessary to repeatedly remind the researcher that they knew what was real and what was not real. These kinds of interactions with real children clash with claims that children's literature is consumed by "an audience that has not yet discovered any firm distinction between reality and imagination" (Nikolajeva, Power 42). Rather, it seems that at least some members of this audience are capable of making this distinction, but find enjoyment in pretending they do not.

On that note, I do not believe that Louise (9), Floor (11) and Janne (14)'s emphasis on their own awareness of the unreality of ghosts should be read as contradictory to their own belief in the prevalence and legitimacy of childhood fantasy/imagination. Instead, it adds some complex nuance about how young readers' understanding of these concepts and their relation to age impacts their conceptualization of their own age, the age of characters and the understanding and enjoyment of fiction. To summarize some earlier sections, Louise (9), Floor (11) and Janne (14), combined with others such as Ella (9) emphatically expressed a love for fantasy/imagination in children's books and firmly placed those qualities within the realm of childhood. However, they also stress that aside from the process which makes one lose fantasy/imagination with age, there is a second, earlier dynamic through which children gain an important awareness that fantasized/imagined things are not real, which – crucially – does not inhibit their enjoyment thereof; it engenders it. This view on how the development of readers' fantasy and imagination interacts with their experience of (children's) literature emphasizes a certain self-aware distance which can be contextualized in a broader discussion of the importance of "suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge 208) for the enjoyment of fiction in the first place, and the cognitive capacities that underpin it.

Ming Dong Gu, writing about the epistemology of fiction, points to the importance of "make-believe or taking the unreal as real" (323). They compare the experience of fiction to a

children's game of home making. Two children [...] may pretend to get married, set up a house, and enact a series of daily routines that a married couple usually engages in. They know clearly that their married life is not true, yet they act it out so earnestly that they derive a lot of fun from it. [...] The same is true of fiction. Fiction cannot give pleasure unless the reader willingly suspends his disbelief while reading the tale. (323)

The argument is that for a reader to be able to suspend disbelief and enjoy fantastical events in fiction, one must be aware that what is read is not true in the first place. As Gu remarks, "if a reader wants to enjoy a good story, he ought to pretend to take it as true" (324). What young participants comment on, partially via Bor, is essentially the importance of being able to do this in the first place. These readers share a love for imagination/fantastical elements in fiction, but have an implicit awareness that it is important to know what they read is not true. Their delight is born from a game of pretend that can only be played if they know that pretending is what they are doing.

John Tooby and Leda Cosmides remark how "the whole educational environment created for [...] children is drenched in fantasy – that is, falsehoods [...]. Why?" (12). The answer they settle on is that "fiction when communicated is not intended to be understood as true" (12). Thus, growing up entails developing the cognitive capacity to "bracket [...] our reception of fiction such that cognitive input during a fictional event is not confused with the truth" (Cook 89). If we do this correctly, readers can "know that there is truth in *King Lear* without *King Lear* being true" (Cook 89). In a vacuum, one could argue that this reading is not entirely relevant for Bor because he is a fictional person existing within a narrative in which the fantastical things are *actually* true. After all, in a universe where bird-girl hybrids exist, it is not a stretch that Bor's ghosts are equally real. However, I would contend that this does not matter because young readers hold Bor to real world standards to interpret his age. For them, he is judged within our parameters of age and fantasy, and in doing so, they adopt the perspectives of the adult characters who are equally unaware of Viegeltje's existence – and seem to similarly operate from our real-world point of view. For younger readers, the final stage of fantasy/imagination before its full disappearance in adulthood is a self-aware cognitive framework in which a child finds enjoyment and satisfaction from pretending to believe in or be certain things/creatures. These readers, through their analyses of Bor and their reflections on their own engagement with fantasy, adopt an intricate and nuanced position in relation to literature and the experience thereof, balancing complex levels of awareness about fiction and themselves.

## Adult readers

The former perspective becomes even more intriguing because – in various ways – it is absent from adult outlooks. In general, adult readers mainly commented on fantasy and imagination in the broader context of children's literature as a whole, or as a reflection on readers, with comparatively fewer comments on characters. Nevertheless, there are a handful of relevant dynamics to explore.

For starters, the emphasis on the difference between Loetje and Bor that is especially present in Janne's assessment, is largely absent from adult views. For them, both child characters have the same relation to fantasy and have it in similar amounts. Neither is seen as problematic or unusual. Aniek (27) reflected that Bor and Loetje got along "because Bor had so much fantasy and Loetje did too and they helped each other hold on to that."[172] Helena (28) comments how "the way they [= Bor and Loetje] are presented, I think fits with their age or what their age is. Younger, a lot of fantasy […] afraid of ghosts. Like the childlike that is still active."[173] Jasmijn (30) remarks how "all of them measure up to the age I had in mind for them. [Joke van Leeuwen] really does write the kids as kids I think. Including their train of thought and stuff. Like how Bor sees that ghost or spirit."[174] Some go slightly further and offer comments that fundamentally oppose all the emphasis young readers place on being aware that fantastical things do not actually exist. Jasmijn (30) – in talking about Loetje – remarks how "the fantasy she has, like the not stepping on black paving stones thing – her fear of falling into a hole, I feel like that's typical for that age."[175] Similarly, Akke (40) remarks how "yeah fantasy takes a hold of you and drags you along and it's like dad and mom have to come look and need to scare the ghosts away. That is mostly a children's thing. The fantasy I mean, and the fact that they really believe in ghosts and spirits."[176]

The construction of childhood that emerges here is fundamentally different. Both child characters are seen as equally exemplary portrayals of childhood as a time of genuine fears grounded in true belief. There is no recognition of a form of suspension of disbelief – neither for the characters, nor for "real" children. Furthermore, for as much as child readers tended to think of Bor's fantasy/imagination as a problem to be resolved, there are no adult readers who take the side of the adult doctors. While many adult readers did not comment on the adult doctors, those that did, ended up defending Bor's right to believe in ghosts. In my interview with Ans (33), I asked her what she thought about the adult and child characters being put in different wards in the Horstel, as the narrative does not explore the adult doctors' motivation in separating the characters. Ans replied that "the doctors think that it is wrong for a child to think about something that according to

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[172] Original text: "omdat die Bor ook zoveel fantasieën heeft en Loetje ook dat die daar zo mekaar wat over hebben blijven warmhouden."

[173] Original text: "De manier waarop zij afgebeeld worden, vind ik wel dat past bij hun leeftijd of wat ik denk dat hun leeftijd is. Zo jonger, heel veel fantasie […], bang voor spoken. Zo dat kinderlijke dat nog bezig is."

[174] Original text: "Ik vond dat ze allemaal wel, ze klopten met de leeftijd dat ik in mijn hoofd had. Ja. Ze schrijft de kindjes ook echt als kindjes denk ik. Ook hun gedachtegang en zo, hoe dat Bor zo dat spookje dan ziet of het geestje."

[175] Original text: "Zo de fantasie die ze heeft euhm, met op die zwarte tegels te stappen, dat ze daar dan in gaat vallen, dat lijkt mij wel typisch iets voor die leeftijd."

[176] Original text: "Ja dat is de fantasie die zo nog aan de haal gaat met u en je bent daar met mee en dan is dat zo en papa moet komen kijken of mama moet komen kijken of de spoken moeten weggejaagd worden dat is toch eerder iets meer van kinderen. De fantasie denk ik vooral. [XXX] en het feit dat ze echt nog geloven van spoken en geesten bestaan."

them does not exist [...] The doctor assumes that an adult knows what is real and what is not real. [...] It is not the same for a doctor as when a child thinks about ghosts."[177] For Ans, this is problematic and unfair. While she understands where the doctor is coming from, she is adamant that "you shouldn't say to a child that if they see ghosts it cannot be true."[178] Similarly, Aniek (27) remarked how she thinks Bor is older because:

> Loetje also has a lot of fantasy and that is not seen as abnormal or anything. But that other kid was institutionalized so to say. So that is seen like [XXX] too much fantasy is an impediment in life. So that's why I think he is older because he has the same fantasies but it is seen as more problematic.[179]

Building further on this analysis slightly later in the interview, Aniek complained "that we are quick to say about children that 'there's something wrong with them' while you know, maybe it is just a child with a lot of imagination."[180]

For Aniek and Ans, the mental hospital in *Iep!*, while not necessarily a particularly dreary or malevolent place, is nevertheless a space that enforces a particular kind of adult normativity. On its own, the observation that the adult doctors construct adulthood explicitly in terms of reason and logic (e.g. "an adult knows what is real and what is not real") is not the issue. Rather the problem for Ans and Aniek is that this view is channelled into a treatment for Bor that aims to thrust him into adulthood. When Ans remarks that "you shouldn't say to a child that if they see ghosts it cannot be true", she is – in a way like Jasper – attacking the core message that Louise (9) had identified as being aimed towards child readers: "Don't be afraid of ghosts, they are not real."

To return to the broader discussion of "beings" and "becomings", Aniek and Ans arguably take up a position defending a child's right to *be* a child. Ranging from Aniek's comment about children being perceived as something being wrong with them just for being a child with a lot of imagination, to Ans' argument that you shouldn't tell a child ghosts don't exist, there is a core sentiment at play that children should be allowed to be children on their own terms, without pushing them into adulthood. That being said, the way they envision children's engagement with fantasy and imagination in the first place, does not match with actual child readers' perspectives in two ways. First, younger readers' analyses

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[177] Original text: "Dus de dokters vinden dat als een kind aan iets denkt dat niet bestaat in hun ogen dat dat niet kan. [...]Dus als een volwassene te veel denkt is dat in de ogen van een dokter niet hetzelfde als een kind dat aan spoken denkt."

[178] Original text: "In principe zou je niet mogen zeggen over een kind: 'als je denkt dat je spoken ziet is dat niet waar.'"

[179] Original text: "Loetje heeft ook veel fantasie en dat wordt niet als afwijkend of zo gezien. Maar dat andere kindje is wel opgenomen geweest zogezegd, dus dat wordt dan toch gezien als ja [XX] te veel fantasie dat u belemmert in het leven, dus daarom denk ik dat die ouder is omdat die een beetje dezelfde soort fantasieën nog heeft maar dan als problematischer wordt gezien."

[180] Original text: "dat zo snel bij kinderen wordt gezegd 'er is iets mee aan de hand.' Terwijl ja, misschien is dat gewoon een heel fantasierijk kind."

of Bor emphasized a *becoming* perspective, in which his issues/problems do need to be resolved because they are an impediment to his transition into adulthood. Second, the construction of childhood Aniek and Ans both ascribe to Bor, and then proceed to defend, clashes with how child readers perceived childhood in general, and Bor specifically. Even as a child on his own terms, Bor is "doing imagination wrong" for them by lacking the self-aware suspension of disbelief that children should develop, and by being so fearful as a result.

### 3.1.1.2.6 Closing thoughts on fantasy and imagination

Finally, to close this section, I want to zoom out and reflect on what it means when adults defend a view of childhood that diverges from how children see themselves. Scholars have questioned the extent to which adults' past as children grants them genuine and accurate insight into today's children. Age is a complicated identity marker in that regard because "[u]nlike the other identities […] – gender, sexuality, race, class, (dis)ability – our age is constantly changing" (Overall 98). While there are individuals that in their lifetime will find themselves evolving in terms of some of these other identities, every single adult was a child at some point. On the surface, that leads to the assumption that because "childhood" is something every adult has experience with, they are equally if not more qualified than children to describe and theorize it. As a result, children have historically been "absented from such discussions […] owing to their marginal status within the world of adulthood", leading adults to often "unwittingly 'disguise and occlude' the interests of children" (Egan and Hawkes 318). What we end up with is that "discourses of childhood [reflect] solely an adult perspective rather than a child's" (Lowe 277).

However, one can question the extent to which this adult perspective is accurate. The adult readers' defence of Bor is understandable in light of the significant weight they – in various ways – give to imagination and fantasy as childhood qualities. If, like Ans, you identify your own loss of these traits as one of your chief regrets about growing up, you may be inclined to respond negatively to a situation in which you feel a child's imagination is being suppressed. But how accurate is her view of her own childhood? And would her child-self have held the same view? Or maybe even pitied Bor's genuine fear, like Janne or Louise? In the introduction to Hollindale's *Signs of Childness,* he offers a question for the adult reader of children's literature to consider: "Are we unavoidably stepping back, whether in nostalgia or condescension or escape, in order to reoccupy a prior self? Is it indeed possible to do this?" (8). Note how in Hollindale's phrasing, the re-embodiment of a prior self is not a perfect winding back of the clock. If it is possible, which he calls into question in the first place, that process may involve either nostalgia, condescension or a form of escape, each of which carries with it specific nuances. Hollindale's comment relates to reading children's literature as an adult, but his point that "an adult cannot read a novel […] as a child reads it" (10) fits within broader discourse on the subjectivity with which adults reflect back on childhood.

That subjectivity can be rooted in several aspects, both socio-cultural and biological in nature (Nikolajeva, "Neuroscience" 33). Nostalgia is often brought up in this context. It is one of the first concepts Waller explores in her analysis of adult readers' rereadings of childhood books. She remarks that nostalgia "can be critiqued for relying on realist assumptions about the stability of memory over time that have been undermined by theories of fragmentation and reconstruction" (8). Interestingly enough, she later ascribes a form of adult imagination to this dynamic, writing how "[a]dult accounts [...] have the potential to be unreliable because of the imaginative force of reminiscence [...] featured as adult nostalgia towards their own childhoods and childhood in general" (38). On a similar note, Overall remarks that:

> Of course we have memories of our younger self, but are those memories not tinted by our present perspective, which is that of a much older person? And when we still feel 'young inside', as we often do or think we do, do we then really feel the way we did when we actually were young? (95)

Across the board, adult readers granted imagination and fantasy more weight than child readers tended to do. Even Margareta (73), one of the few adult readers who was adamant about fantasy and imagination not having a place in adulthood (while simultaneously lamenting how she is not allowed to express it either) emphasised it is a vitally important trait for children: "fantasy is very important."[181] Interestingly, what we see with some of these readers, is an explicit form of reminiscing – or arguably nostalgia – that informs these statements. Margareta gleefully shared how, as a child, she would hide under the table with a book and live in her own fantasy world while reading. In my interview with Akke (40), she first remarked that "children have a very lively sense of fantasy" and immediately added the comment "I remember how when I was young I always had the feeling of being chased or of something being under my bed."[182]

The point I want to get to is that adult readers' celebration of childhood fantasy/imagination seemed to be marked by a form of temporal distance built on personal memories/nostalgia, or at least on a broader awareness of socio-cultural discourse on childhood, which I would argue may contribute to an idealization of childhood fantasy/imagination. Whether or not adult readers felt that they successfully resisted pressures to lose childhood fantasy/imagination, or whether or not those pressures were deemed justified, all adult readers recognized that the trappings of adulthood do not include imagination. As a result, they are reflecting on fantasy from the perspective of someone for whom that quality has become locked away behind social age norms. Consequently, it is granted much more weight by adults than by children themselves. Furthermore, this also fits within Gubar's argument that "[i]dealizing children [...] tempts

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[181] Original text: "Fantasie dat is heel belangrijk."

[182] Original text: "kinderen hebben een heel levendige fantasie. En ik herinner mij zelf ook nog wel als ik jong was dat ik altijd het gevoel had dat ik werd achtervolgd of dat er iets onder mijn bed lag."

us to regard them as an unrealistically homogenous […] group" (Gubar, "Innocence" [2nd edition] 106). Indeed, adult readers seemed to celebrate a fantasy-based construct of childhood which is applied to all children, fictional or real. For adult readers, Bor and Loetje possess the same kind of fantasy/imagination, that fantasy/imagination entails the complete and unquestioned belief in unreal things, and this trait is good to have and should be defended. For child readers, Bor in particular is a troubled child who is too old to believe in ghosts, a problem which needs to be resolved.

Furthermore, by aligning themselves with the Horstel's doctors, Louise (9) and Janne (14) exemplify a broader undercurrent that emerges among several young readers. In contrast to adult readers, there is little to no criticism or trepidation about the loss of imagination with age among younger readers, and that holds across their views on literature, themselves and characters. Young readers were familiar with the societal norm of adulthood as a time of rationality with little room for fantasy, but instead of reading against that norm by defending adults' right to imagination, they were the participants who criticized this norm the least: David (10) supports didactic children's literature, focused on teaching "real" things instead of stimulating the imagination, thus arguably adopting a more restrictive view than many adults, Ella (9) finds it "weird" to think about adults enjoying children's literature in the first place, as the vast majority are believed to lack imagination and fantasy, and Floor (11) implicitly excludes herself from childhood through the interaction between her construction of adulthood and her definition of fantasy. Simply put, while the very concept of an imaginative adult is not attacked by younger readers, neither is it celebrated. Instead it is constructed as unusual and unlikely – a rare curiosity, like Janne's (14) teacher liking star wars.

In Schneider's terms, much can once again be said about how readers construct categories and apply them to characters, decategorize certain characters, and individuate others. There was an interesting contrast between younger participants and older participants in terms of how childhood and old age were categorized and individuated. Younger readers generally applied adulthood as a category patently devoid of imagination or fantasy. Although they do leave room for an individuation process in which a particular adult can express imagination or fantasy while still being considered an adult, the basic category itself is essentially devoid of imagination, which is only added through individuation (e.g. Janne's teacher). Meanwhile, child characters above a certain age that believe fantastical events or creatures are real were not quite decategorized as children, but they did undergo a far-reaching individuation process as children in need of guidance or psychological support. Like child readers, adult readers did not include fantasy as part of their category of "adulthood", however many individuated themselves by proclaiming their own fantasy, or criticized the category of adulthood itself for not containing fantasy or imagination. That being said, this critical perspective on adulthood was mirrored by a view on child characters where little individuation took place. Childhood was seen as a uniform category in which fantastical things are perceived as real, and all child characters were

understood with little distinction through a lens born from that categorization. In fact, the doctors in the Horstel were essentially criticized by adult readers such as Ans (33) for attempting to go against this categorization process. Through this range of responses, the topics of fantasy and imagination became anchors around which some readers built sweeping generalizations about certain age groups, whereas others invoked them to endorse their own distinct individuality.

### 3.1.1.3 *Concluding thoughts on age norms*

In my general introduction for chapter 3, I pointed out that the distinction I make between the three subchapters is – to an extent – artificial, and that they can best be conceptualized as non-hierarchical entry points into a rhizomic data-network. As such, this section of the thesis operated on the premise of identifying a set of particularly compelling age norms and exploring what they can tell us about how the age of the real reader affects the understanding of age in literature for young readers. When I originally decided to explore age norms as part of my dissertation, I did not envision this section to become as large as it did. That being said, I believe that the lengthy discussion above speaks to the significance and pervasiveness of age norms, not only for the way readers give meaning to their own age and to age in children's literature, but also as part of the broader discourse surrounding children's books themselves. For this conclusion, I will reflect on the findings that I think are most significant, while acknowledging that these results should be interpreted as couched within a particular research project and in a particular cultural setting, with a limited sample of readers.

Hence, I want to once again recognize the messy and subjective nature of qualitative research in general, and my research in particular. Qualitative research is "inevitably shaped, and even intentionally informed, by the researcher's orientation, values, and personal qualities" (Spencer et al. 83). This is also true for the above analyses. For instance, although many readers actively used words such as "wisdom" or "imagination", many did not. Thus, for some of my analyses, I had to apply those labels to reflections in which readers did not use those literal words. In those instances, the connections and frameworks I apply are born in part from my own values and orientation. I have attempted to do so in a transparent and conscientious way. Furthermore, the nature of interview-based empirical research also introduces a level of artificiality in readers' responses. As I established in the theoretical framework, age is rarely the subject of active reflection to the same degree as race or sex (Van Lierop-Debrauwer 80). Instead, age norms tend to remain in the background as unquestioned, and arguably even subconscious, taken-for-granted assumptions. As such, the entire premise of my research project forces readers to concretely reflect on thought processes that normally operate in the background. From the start of a reader's participation, acquiring informed consent compelled me to inform them about age being the core focal point of my research project. In addition, readers' reflections were not made in a vacuum, but were responses to my interview questions, which were intended to generate data about age in the first place, and were asked by an

interviewer who outwardly demonstrates certain "personal qualities", including age (Spencer et al. 83).

The broader point I want to make here, is that I stand behind the observations I made regarding readers' uses of various age norms, but that I also recognize the artificially prompted nature of readers' comments in the first place. There is a difference between whatever happens subconsciously in a person's mind when they apply age norms in everyday life, and a reader's responses to concrete questions about age asked by a researcher in his mid-twenties after they have read a book while being fully aware that the entire process is part of a research project on age. Keeping all of that in mind, I am thus making no claims about the method approximating real-world conditions, or the data representing organic mental processes readers would experience in everyday life. Despite these limitations, I do want to underline certain aspects of my results that give particularly interesting insights into readers and their views on age in children's literature.

When we zoom out, there are few to none perfect dynamics that suggest a direct, unequivocal link between readers' age and their use of the discussed age norms to give meaning to their own age and age in children's literature. Within each age-group there tended to be several co-existing dynamics which sometimes complemented one another and sometimes clashed. In a way, this illustrates both the "messiness" of qualitative research (Spencer et al. 93), and the heterogeneity that can be found within an age group (Woodward, "Wisdom" 200). People are complex, and no single factor is likely to explain how they respond to particular cultural notions. In that regard, the merit of my research and analyses partially lies in its exploratory character. Instead of focusing on niche particular questions, my approach to covering a wide range of topics in the interview guides, combined with a larger group of participants, now allows me to point at several further avenues of research that seem promising. For example, while age by itself did not explain some of the results, its entanglement with other identity markers seemed to matter significantly. Among young readers' views on fantasy, gender emerged as an identity marker that compounded with age to shape responses. Likewise, various adult readers reflected on how their own children, or lack thereof, shaped their response to child characters. Finally, readers such as Maaike (42) pointed to the salience of urban and rural differences in determining adherence to age norms such as children's innocence.

I am of course not the first scholar to explore empirical data only to find that experiences of age cannot be reduced to chronological age. Sparrman, for example, has used "the theory of affective economy" to discuss young participants' reactions to advertisements. This framework emphasizes how objects, subjects, concepts and so on "'stick' together and how that process creates collective coherence" (231). Towards the end of her discussion, she stresses that

none of these qualities reside either in the images, the depicted people, their clothing, or the children. Age is enacted and made in practice through the process of sticking different attributes to one another. (240)

So, beyond pointing at interesting further avenues of research, I also want to demonstrate what further insight can be gained from adopting such a lens in which all these topics are put into a broader conversation with one another. The last section of this thesis will zoom in on readers' entanglement with a broader world filled with objects and concepts that shape and interact with their experience of age, both in the sense of their own age and age in children's literature.

Despite the lack of general, all-encompassing dynamics, there were nevertheless some tendencies that emerged across broader groups of readers that were particularly surprising or notable. For instance: the comparatively high level of strictness with which the youngest and oldest readers applied age norms. This was surprising for a number of reasons. I previously highlighted Hunt's quote that "[i]t is likely that child-readers, who are in the process of learning societal and literary norms, will read against societal norms, and be ready to misread or identify the blindnesses of the text" (*Criticism* 11). This roughly overlaps with much older empirical work by Neugarten et al., who did research with more than two hundred participants between 20 and 65+ years old,[183] and found that with increasing age, there is an "increase in the extent to which respondents ascribe importance to age norms and place constraints upon adult behavior in terms of age appropriateness" (715). Thus, from Hunt and Neugarten et al.'s work, the assumption could be drawn that with increasing age, readers would adhere more strictly to age norms. To an extent, my data does affirm this, with readers such as Margareta (73) claiming that continued fantasy in old age is a form of mental illness, and readers like Roma (62) advocating for the restriction of access to certain books to maintain children's innocence. However, young readers also showed a surprising adherence to age norms, notwithstanding the fact that they sometimes used performative adherence to these age norms to secretly subvert them for their own purposes. In the case of such performative adherence in particular, Hunt's prediction that children would read against societal norms seems a bit optimistic. Instead, relatively young readers showed a distinct awareness of societal norms and figured out ways to turn them to their advantage. Furthermore, and in particular where fantasy and imagination were concerned, young readers distinguished themselves from adults with a more rigid, albeit complex and nuanced, understanding of how children are supposed to develop into adults. I am not arguing here that the young readers are aggressively gatekeeping imagination as solely the territory of childhood, but they also do not appear to be the open-minded free spirits Hunt envisioned. In fact, in some respects their position aligns more with Tandoi's readers, who similarly had strong opinions about what a "normal" child should be like, calling *My Name Is Mina'*s main

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[183] No exact maximum age is given in the paper.

character a "crazy person" ("Negotiating" 85) for deviating from that norm (See also Joosen, "Kinderachtig").

This brings me to the second aspect that I wish to underline briefly in this conclusion, the fact that children were routinely underestimated by older readers. Generally speaking, when adult readers described children or childhood, they emphasized their own love and respect for children, but also sketched an image of an unnuanced innocent time filled with so much fantasy that children struggle to distinguish reality from fiction, as they simply do not know any better. In reality, child participants did not only have some of the most complex relationships with constructions of age across my entire sample of participants, their insightful reflections sometimes surprised me and – during the focus groups – changed older readers' views. Recent scholarship has stressed the value and agency that children can bring to empirical research if taken seriously (e.g. Daelman 12), which my results affirm. The examples range from Ella (9) and Janne (14) offering deeply personal reflections to add nuance to characters that older readers had dismissed, to readers such as Floor (11) and Louise (9) exploring their complex thoughts on the intricacy of genuine belief and childhood imagination in fiction and real life, or Agamemnon (11) and Katrijn (13) reflecting on their awareness of adult constructions of childhood and their personal subversions of them. Simply put, child readers' understanding of age was often different from adult readers, but in no way were their insights less complex, nuanced or significant.

In closing, age norms are only one component of the complex social and cultural baggage that readers bring to bear on a particular piece of literature. In the next subsection of chapter 3.1., I delve deeper into the importance of memory, which I have only briefly introduced here. For that section, I also shift my focus away from *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen*, and instead explore readers' reactions to David Almond's *My Name Is Mina.*

## 3.1.2 Readers' memories and empathy

### 3.1.2.1 *Introduction*
Although research into readers' responses to literature is diverse, memory is a topic that scholars from a variety of fields have discussed to explain and explore how readers give meaning to what they read (a.o. Larsen and Seilman; Waller; Caracciolo; Schneider). Although the meaning of "memory" can vary from field to field and researcher to researcher, scholars generally take an interest in readers' memories, in the broadest sense, as a kind of experiential resource from which they can (or must) draw to give meaning to – or more broadly interpret – fiction. This subsection of my dissertation discusses a set of interviews I designed and conducted with my colleague Emma-Louise Silva, in which we asked readers of different ages to keep track of the memories that reading *My Name Is Mina* prompted for them. These memories were then discussed in a semi-structured interview. Using that data, this section of my dissertation explores research question 2: "**When reading a children's book, what memories are prompted in readers of different ages, and do these memories impact an empathic response to characters?**"

The analyses I present here continue my exploration of readers' "top-down" meaning-making, and make it more explicit. Whereas the previous section on age norms sometimes veered into exploring implicit messages and unspoken ideas, here the purpose is to draw out concrete information "from memory storages (top-down)", and explore together with the readers how those memories shape their reading experience, with a particular focus on empathy (Schneider, "Reception" 120). This section will begin with a theoretical framework that explores the academic discourse on memory, empathy and emotions – three concepts that are often put into a broader conversation about the way readers connect to fiction. Afterwards, there will be a brief summary of how the interview cycle was organized, before I delve into my analyses.

### 3.1.2.2 *Memory, empathy and emotions in reader-response research*

Scholars from a variety of fields point to "memory" as an important aspect of how readers make sense of literature. For some scholars, the "memories" they are interested in are the concrete actual experiences readers think back to while reading, whereas others shift away from concrete specific memories, into abstract analyses of "memory" as a shorthand for an almost subconscious, social awareness of common patterns and themes in society at large. Schneider, for instance, tends to fall in this second group. He refers to memory as a key component of "top-down" meaning-making, mostly in the form of a reader's "structure of social knowledge stored in long-term memory" ("Construction" 617). Schneider mainly refers to this memory-stored social knowledge via examples such as readers' awareness of literary stock characters, personality theories, social categories and social class ("Construction" 619-621). This is memory in the broadest sense – the idea that readers do not read in a vacuum but have been introduced to societal norms and literary tropes at some point in their lives. The age norms that I discussed in the previous section can be said to be an example of social memory in this sense.

Steen Larsen and Uffe Seilman recognize the importance of these kinds of memories for a reader's experience of literature and refer to them as a reader's "world knowledge" (Larsen and Seilman 416). However, they also acknowledge the difference between this vague social awareness and readers' unique private memories, which can have a deeply personal impact on the reading experience. In fact, Larsen and Seilman emphasize the value of empirically exploring "personal, autobiographical memory" for individual meaning-making, as it is these specific kinds of memories, rather than Schneider's broader social memories, that can explain why "different readers, even with similar backgrounds and present circumstances, may react very differently to a given work" (417).

One way in which these different memory-derived responses to the same work may be expressed is through differing degrees of empathy with a given character. Empathy is an intricate concept, and its definitions are legion. Heidi L. Maibom offers a broad description, characterizing empathy as "a vicarious psychological reaction to the situation or psychological state of another." She then continues by exploring a spectrum of more

specific reactions that fit within this broad umbrella of empathic responses, such as "perspective taking", "sympathy" and "affective empathy."

For Maibom, affective empathy refers to an "emotional reaction to another person's emotion or situation that matches, more or less, what the other person feels" (Maibom). This is arguably the most common interpretation of empathy, in which someone is, for example, sad or happy, because they see someone else being sad or happy (Keen 3; Djikic et al. 34). Maibom's "perspective taking" is also often referred to as "cognitive empathy" (Djikic et al 37) or "mind-reading" (Fjällström and Kokkola), and describes a cognitive (and thus not an affective) state. It involves being able to understand someone else's viewpoint, without any emotional impact (Djikic et al. 37). Finally, Maibom also discusses "sympathy", which is "directed towards another's welfare, but is rarely similar to the emotion the person feels." In a nutshell, scholars distinguish between types of empathy where one feels the same emotionally as the other person, cognitively understands another person, or feels strong unrelated emotions in response to another person's plight. It should be noted here that Maibom's summary is not universally accepted. As Suzanne Keen remarks, "not all […] agree on the components, processes, and outcomes of empathy" (4). Keen points out that some scholars consider sympathy a "more complex, differentiated feeling" compared to empathy, instead of being an example thereof (4).

Memory and empathy are closely intertwined concepts. Several elements contribute to how readers empathize with fictional characters. Rowena and Bruce Stening argue that "the intensity of [an] empathetic move relies greatly on factors such as age, experience, and the cultural and historical situation of the reader" (288). Memories are of particular interest in that sense, because – in some obvious, and some less obvious ways – they are entangled with those exact same factors, among others, and thus may lead to different empathic reactions. I will return to the significance of age later, but the importance of experience is fairly self-evident; several scholars remark that empathy relies "on a recognition of […] prior (or current) experience" (Stening and Stening 288), on our "personal histories" (Keen 5) or on the overlap with the "experiential background" of reader and character (Caracciolo 130). Simply put, the reader might be more inclined, or able, to empathize with a character if they have gone through similar ordeals and remember how this felt. Anne Whitehead remarks that in that sense, empathy "is often governed by identity and similarity", adding that a potential risk may even be that empathy "is prone to exclusion and ethnocentrism" when we are asked to empathize with someone with whom we have little in common (57). That being said, this is open to debate and not all scholars agree that characters need to be even vaguely familiar to readers for them to be able to empathize. Fjällström and Kokkola point out that "empathy allows readers to engage with decidedly alien characters, putting themselves in the characters' shoes whilst retaining critical distance. These readers do not feel the need to connect the fictional content to their personal experiences" (402).

As scholars differentiate between kinds of empathy based in part on the presence of an emotional reaction, it should be acknowledged that memories can also be entangled with emotions. Maurice Bloch remarked that "experimental work has shown how memories which individuals did not know they had can be brought to the surface by, for example, inducing certain emotional states" (116). Waller's monograph *Rereading Childhood Books* (2019) contains a wealth of reflections on this topic. Waller asked a group of adult readers between the ages of 18 and 80+ to reread a book from their childhood and reflect on this experience.[184] One of the main topics Waller consequently discusses is how readers' recalled memories tinted and shaped their experience of rereading the book, and furthermore, how this was entangled with emotions. For example, she cites her interview with Dorothy, a reader in her sixties whose rereading of a book from her youth was shaped by "positive memories of reading in school" (73). Waller discusses this in the context of what she calls "affective traces", which are emotional connections between a reader's memories and the experience of literature (90). Her argument is that, first of all, "recollections are organized and reconstructed via emotional 'tags'. Intense emotions […] help to 'fix' memories more securely for future recall" (92). During the reading process, the recollection of these memories may then give deeper emotional weight to readers' experience of the book. Waller herself discusses that such emotional responses are often deemed significant for the stimulation of empathy (91).

That last point should also be acknowledged in more detail. The argument that reading literature promotes empathy within the reader is a common one. Rather than claiming that a reader uses personal experiences to empathize with fictional characters, some stress the importance of reading in the first place, based on the premise that being exposed to fictional minds and situations can serve as a substitute for real-life experience, and consequently, that by reading we can trigger empathic responses in real life. Simply put, there is a sentiment that "narrative has the potential to encourage empathy with often-marginalized others" (Mar and Oatley 181; see also Stephens vi; Whitehead 55). This argument, however, is also contentious. Suzanne Keen questions it at several points throughout her book *Empathy and the Novel,* and she is far from the only one (see also Waller 91; Fjällström and Kokkola 407). In Keen's conclusion, she argues that

> Readers, which is to say living people, bring empathy to the novel, and they alone have the capacity to convert their emotional fusion with the denizens of make-believe worlds into actions on behalf of real others. That they rarely decide to do so should not be taken as a sign of fiction's failings. (168)

At the same time, there is some empirical research that suggests that literature can indeed stimulate empathy. Djikic et al. conducted an experiment where 100 readers filled in several questionnaires, including a Big Five Personality Trait test, before and after reading

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[184] Waller does not mention exact ages but lists whether a participant is 40+,50+,60+, etc.

a short story or essay. They found that reading the short story stimulated cognitive empathy, though they point out that it was only readers who scored low on the Openness aspect of a Big Five Personality Trait test who then self-reported as having more empathy after reading fiction (42). At the very least, this is a complex issue that cannot be reduced to generalized statements.

The intricate interplay of memory, empathy and emotion makes for a topic ripe for further empirical exploration. One aspect Emma-Louise Silva and I were interested in exploring, was whether readers' ages influenced if and how they used memories to empathize with characters. This is, however, a complex matter, and the direct association of age with memory is not as straightforward as it may seem. Psychologists and neurologists have observed that the brain's handling of memory changes with age. To quote Torkel Klingberg, "[t]he memory system requires its maturity, just like other parts of the brain" (42). Various age and children's literature scholars have commented on the (lack of) accuracy with which adults look back on their past, and their childhood in particular. Haynes and Murris have remarked that "memory is not a matter of 'the' past. 'It' recreates the past each time it is invoked" (Haynes and Murris, "Post-age" 976). This is significant, not only in terms of the accuracy of the memories that readers may use to empathize with characters, but also because it raises questions about the impact time may have on the way readers empathize with characters who are significantly younger than they are. On that broader note, Nikolajeva has remarked that "[a]gainst the background of memory research, the romanticised view of so-called authentic childhood memories, whether idyllic or traumatic, becomes highly contestable. They are not genuine recollections, but confabulations" (Nikolajeva, "Neuroscience" 33).

In this context, earlier analyses from this thesis are also relevant. I have commented on ways in which the age norms of childhood imagination and fantasy seem to be more important for those adult readers who feel that this quality has escaped them with age, or is kept from them via social enforcement. In that sense, they seem to have reacquired an appreciation for these qualities by recontextualizing childhood memories from their new adult vantagepoint. In contrast, it seemed not to matter as much for child readers, who envisioned the aging process' suppression of fantasy at worst as a neutral change that naturally happens as you grow up. The adult recontextualization of childhood memories may also influence empathic responses. An emotional reaction may only be attached to certain memories over time through reflection, which will then in turn reshape empathic response. In memory studies, there is a concept called "mnemohistory", which is "concerned not with the past [...], but only with the past as it is remembered. [T]he past is modelled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present" (Assmann qtd. in Tamm 464). Adult memories of childhood can be mnemohistorical in this sense.

In any case, there is even some preliminary evidence that child readers themselves do not necessarily empathize with *My Name Is Mina*'s main character Mina. I have previously

commented on Tandoi's findings that the ten- and eleven-year-old readers she interviewed considered Mina "crazy" and "pointless", while joking about David Almond himself being insane for conceiving of her in the first place ("Negotiating" 84-85). In that regard, this does not disprove Whitehead's remark that empathy is "governed by identity and similarity" (57), but it does show that large overlaps between reader and character in terms of age and the broader "cultural and historical situation of the reader" are not infallible shortcuts to empathy either (Stening and Stening 288).

### 3.1.2.3 *Our approach*

I have outlined the approach for these interviews in the methodological section of this thesis, so I will only reiterate the most important parts here. Emma-Louise Silva and I conducted 5 interviews with 6 readers between the ages of 9 and 79. The discrepancy between the number of readers and the number of interviews was due to Mathijs and Merlijn, the youngest readers – and brothers – who only wished to participate if they could do so together. Their interview was thus an outlier in the sense that it was the only duo-interview we conducted. All interviews were conducted digitally, with the exception of Empee's, who preferred to meet in person to participate. I recognize that there is a significant age-gap between Barbara and Empee. This was due to availability issues with some participants.

| Pseudonym | Age | Sex |
|---|---|---|
| Mathijs | 9 | M |
| Merlijn | 11 | M |
| Abby | 23 | F |
| Siena | 30 | F |
| Barbara | 38 | F |
| Empee | 79 | M |

*Table 3: participants for the* My Name Is Mina *memory interviews*

Prior to sending a copy of the book to the participants, the following assignment was communicated via email.

> One of the things we will talk about during the interview is memories. Therefore we'd like to ask you to mark the parts in *My Name is Mina* where you remember something. This does not need to be something that happened to you personally. It can be a story someone told you, or something you saw happen to someone else. Whenever you have such a memory while reading, mark it with a word or a short

phrase (e.g. "car" or "trip to Italy") so you'll remember later what you were thinking about with that part of the book.[185]

We phrased this request for "memories" very broadly with the specific intent of gathering an unrestrained range of replies. Waller noted for her own research project that "'memories' encompass a range of more discrete cognitive phenomena" such as autobiographical, semantic and personal memories (28). That being said, the borders between these concepts can be fuzzy. In Maurice Bloch's chapter on autobiographical memory, he comments that he is "making use of the distinction […] between autobiographical, or episodic, memory and semantic memory, if only, later, to stress their similarity" (115-116). Like Waller, our interest mainly rested on the autobiographical aspect, but we were curious what range of cognitive phenomena the readers would label as "memories." This turned out to offer some interesting results, as I will explore later.

Our approach was an adaptation of Steen Larsen and Uffe Seilman's "method of self-probed retrospection" (419), first presented in a 1988 article. Larsen and Seilman developed this method after they noted that to explain why "a reader may feel a literary work to be deeply relevant and meaningful" (417), scholars must account for the resonance of "personal remindings" (418). Simply put, they were curious which memories were prompted by the reading experience, and thus developed an approach which "attempts to catch memories of personal experiences as they are evoked during 'natural' reading; to determine where and by which cues in the text they are elicited; and to examine some features of their content" (419). Larsen and Seilman described their approach as consisting of a "concurrent" and "retrospective" phase. In the concurrent phase, readers read a short story and put marks at any point in the text where a reminding occurs. This is followed immediately by the retrospective phase in which "readers are questioned about each reminding by using each of their marks in the text as a probe, one at a time" (420).

Emma-Louise Silva and I adopted the core ideas of the method, but made some changes for our own purposes. The biggest change is that instead of working with a short story, we asked readers to read a much longer work. *My Name Is Mina*'s Dutch translation encompasses 239 pages. Therefore, we could not ask readers to read the whole book at once and then complete the interview immediately afterwards. Thus, to keep track of the relevant memories, readers were asked to add keywords or short descriptions, instead of simply an indeterminate mark, as to ensure that the actual memory could be recalled

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[185] Original text: "Tijdens het interview gaan we het onder andere hebben over herinneringen. Daarom willen we je graag vragen om tijdens het lezen van Mijn naam is Nina aan te duiden wanneer het boek een herinnering bij je opwekt. Dit moet niet iets zijn dat je zelf hebt meegemaakt. Het kan een verhaal zijn waar je over hebt horen vertellen, of iets wat je met iemand hebt zien gebeuren. Als je tijdens het lezen aan zo een herinnering denkt, duid die dan aan met een woord of korte zin, (bv. 'auto' of 'reis naar Italië') zodat je later nog weet waar je aan dacht bij dat deel van het boek."

during the interview. Furthermore, due to the shorter stories Larsen and Seilman worked with, they were able to ask readers to discuss every single mark that they added to the text. In our case, it was not realistic to ask readers to explain – even superficially – every memory across 239 pages. Instead, we gave readers time to leaf through the book and select memories that were particularly salient for them and that they wished to share with us. It should thus be acknowledged that the memories we ended up discussing with the participants were the result of a selection process on their side.

### 3.1.2.4 *A brief overview of readers' memories*
The majority of memories that readers discussed in response to our prompt fell under the broad category of "autobiographic" memory. Olick et al. define this as

> the events of one's own life that one remembers because they were experienced directly, though it also includes reference to events which one did not experience directly but around which one's memory is oriented. For instance, you are likely to remember what you were doing when an event designated historic by the group took place—such as the attacks of September 11, 2001—even if these events did not affect you directly. (11)

Most of the autobiographical memories referenced by readers were prompted by Mina's descriptions of – and reflections on – the school system. These are one of the more prominent topics Mina discusses, so the prevalence of memories inspired by these events is not surprising. To offer some examples, Abby (23) shared how the scene where Mina and her mom are visited by the government officials Ms. Palaver and Mr. Trench after Mina's mom decided to start homeschooling prompted a memory of her own struggles with being "helped" by the educational system: "when I had to visit the CLB [Flemish Government student guidance department] because I was a nontypical child. I suspected I had autism but no one believed me. Everyone was like 'yeah we are just here to help you' and I then received zero help."[186] Barbara (38) similarly reflected on memories that involved overlap between her and Mina's view on school, and as I will return to later, she explicitly frames this in a context of empathy:

> I empathized with her about that awful school and the way her creativity was curtailed [...] and the rules that that school enforces like her having to go to the principal, sheesh. [...] it's funny because I really pictured my own school again

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[186] Original text: "Toen ik naar het CLB moest vroeger en dan het andere, niet zo typische kind was. Ik had een vermoeden van autisme en niemand die mij geloofden, en iedereen was dan 'ja we zijn hier alleen maar om u te helpen' en ik kreeg dan totaal geen hulp."

where the principal also had one of those little offices where if you had to go there it was always bad news.[187]

Continuing this trend, Empee (79) discussed an argument he had with his principal in the third year of secondary school. This was prompted by him reading a book

recommended by the religion teacher, with the understanding that we were not allowed to read it yet. But that later when we were grown up, that we should give it a read. Alright, so I buy that book and read it. Anyway it became a big mess because I was reading that obscene book. So that was the concrete conflict with the principal.[188]

Other aspects of Mina's life also prompted memories, with Siena (30), for instance, discussing "the fact that she climbs up in that tree, that she's looking at those birds and stuff. [...] That is like what my own youth was like. I lived in a residential neighborhood. There were a bunch of little friends my age in my class and we used to make tree forts. And we climbed them."[189]

With adult readers, these kinds of reflections comprised the vast majority of what they considered "memories" prompted by the book. There were some more abstract examples that nevertheless still fit under autobiographical memory, such as Barbara's (38) comment that some parts of the book reminded her of songs that she only learned in the last few years, and Empee's (78) comment that reading *My Name Is Mina* reminded him of novels and poetry by Belgian novelist Herman Brusselmans.

The two youngest readers also shared several examples of autobiographical memory. One of *My Name Is Mina's* pivotal scenes involves Mina being yelled at by her teacher Miss Scullery for writing a nonsense story in response to the SATs question: "Write a description of a busy place." This reminded Mathijs (9) of "last year because then I had a strict teacher and she was mad once because someone wrote something completely different than what the teacher had actually asked."[190] Similarly, his older brother Merlijn (11) connected the

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[187] Original text: "Zeker meevoelen met haar als het zo gaat over goh die vreselijke school en zo de manier waarop haar creativiteit wordt beknot [...] en de lijnen die die school uitzet als ze daar bij de directeur moet komen jeetje. [...] Dat is grappig want dan zag ik echt zo mijn school terug waarin dat de directeur ook zo een lokaaltje had waar dat als je daarnaartoe moest gaan was dat eigenlijk nooit goed nieuws."

[188] Original text: "had de leraar godsdienst ons dat boek aanbevolen, met die verstaande dat we dat nog niet mochten lezen, maar dat we later als we groot waren, dat we dat toch wel zeker eens moesten lezen. Ok, dus ik koop dat boek. Ik lees dat. [...] Enfin, dat was een hele historie omdat ik dat schunnig boek aan het lezen was. Dat is dus het concrete conflict met de directeur."

[189] Original text: "het feit dat ze in een boom kruipt, dat ze naar die vogels kijkt en zo. [...]. En dat was voor mij ook wel hoe dat bij mij mijn jeugd was. Ik woonde in een woonwijk. Er zaten heel veel vriendjes van mijn leeftijd, die bij mij in de klas zaten. En wij maakte ook boomhutten. En wij kropen daarin."

[190] Original text: "Toen juf Suf zo een ganse ding wou voor het verhaal en dan bij Nina kwam en dan had ze dat gans gemaakt en dan kwamen er andere dingen op en dan schreef ze die andere dingen, dan was de juf boos en toen dacht ik aan vorig jaar want toen had ik wel een strenge juf en die was toen eens boos omdat iemand iets helemaal anders had geschreven dan de juf eigenlijk had gevraagd."

minor character of Sophie to some of his memories. In the book, Sophie "walked with a limp", for which she needed surgery. This reminded Merlijn of "someone in my class who cannot write well and has something with his brains and cannot walk well. He also has to be operated on because of that."[191]

However, what set young readers apart was the broader range of reflections that they included under the label of "memory." During our interview, I told the two brothers that I was interested in hearing any memories that were important for them during the reading of the book. In reply, Merlijn (11) discussed how

> like with how Mina used to carve into her tree and I think that should not be allowed because you are hurting the tree and she thought about it and said 'I should not do this anymore because I'm hurting the tree' [...] If I was that tree, I would be mad and would like to fall on top of her because she absolutely should not do this. But yeah then I'm dead too.[192]

Similarly, when I asked his younger brother about his memories, he replied that "there was a part where she was flying and suddenly I thought about standing on a mountain and jumping off and right before I hit the ground a parachute opens above me."[193] On the one hand, I recognize that these responses could be explained by the younger participants misinterpreting the broader prompt, and instead opting to tell me about the things they remember thinking while reading. On the other hand, however, these comments also align substantially with how Torkel Klingberg characterizes child participants in memory research in his book *The Learning Brain: Memory and Brain Development in Children*. Klingberg remarks that "children are not always reliable when it comes to recounting events. The main problem is that they tend to fill in details from their own imaginations" (35). Mathijs and Merlijn both show that they understood the prompt well enough to discuss autobiographical memories in other instances. However, on top of those autobiographical memories, they opted to add additional reflections rooted in their imagination. The point is that though there were more abstract interpretations of memory among adult readers, such as references to songs or other works of fiction, only the youngest readers included these kinds of imaginative replies as examples of memories.

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[191] Original text: "iemand in mijn klas die kan niet goed, euhm, die kan niet goed schrijven en daarom dat hij iets heeft aan zijn hersenen en niet goed stappen. Die moet ook een operatie ondergaan daarvoor."

[192] Original text: "Ah zo dat Nina vroeger op haar boom kerfde en ik vind dat dat niet mag want je doet de boom pijn en daardoor heeft ze dat ook, heeft ze daarover nagedacht en toen zei ze 'ja ik mag dat niet meer doen want ik doe de boom pijn' [...] Als ik die boom zou zijn, dan zou ik boos worden en zou ik liefst omvallen recht op haar omdat ze dat echt niet mag doen, maar ja dan ben ik zelf ook dood, ja."

[193] Original text: "Er was iets dat die aan het vliegen was en opeens dan dacht ik dat ik op een berg stond en opeens daar af sprong en net voordat ik ging beneden komen, opeens een parachute boven mij kwam."

### 3.1.2.5 *Child readers: imagination, animistic thinking and empathy*

Merlijn's (11) imaginative reply was particularly interesting to me, because upon further reflection, it ties into much of what Emma-Louise Silva and I wished to explore. Ultimately this reflection constituted a memory by the time the interview took place. Even though it was a thought he had while reading, he found it significant enough to recall it during our later interview. Furthermore, it contains arguably the most explicit instance of empathic thought in the entire interview I conducted with the two young brothers, and intriguingly, it was on behalf of an inanimate object instead of any of the characters. Marco Caracciolo has argued that empathy "allows us to understand other people's mental states […] by imagining how we would react if we found ourselves in their situation" (130). It is difficult to imagine a more fitting example than "If I was that tree, I would be mad and would like to fall on top of her because she absolutely should not do this. But yeah then I'm dead too." Merlijn's comment arguably falls under cognitive empathy. He did not relate feeling genuine anger himself, as much as he understood why the tree would feel anger in that moment.

This instance of empathy for an inanimate object, combined with the imaginativeness of the reply, demonstrates the power of children's animistic thinking, i.e., the belief "that objects are alive, speak and move" (Haynes and Murris, "Philosophising" 296). Haynes and Murris have criticized adult dismissiveness of children's animistic thinking from several different angles. Earlier in this thesis, I referred to their work to argue that the same discourse that dismissively frames childhood imagination and fantasy as 'cute' or 'childish' ("Philosophising" 297) also hurts adults by limiting valid constructs of adulthood to those that stress rationality and push for a disconnect from our emotions. Here, I wish to briefly focus on their related suggestion that because western society constantly reinforces a "nature/culture binary", we add an additional hurdle for ourselves in "caring about the earth" ("Philosophising" 296).

In other words, if the non-human is only allowed to be constructed as dead and lifeless, we are less likely to be emotionally invested in its well-being. When children demonstrate animistic thinking by ascribing life to objects, and perhaps empathizing with them, this is often "negatively characterised as 'childish'", and as something to be "left behind in the process of growing up" (Haynes and Murris, "Philosophising" 299). In their article, Haynes and Murris quote children's literature scholar Alice Curry, who argues that tropes such as a moving teddy bear (or in our case, a thinking tree) "can magically give 'voice to, a specifically ecological other' and precisely because they do not belong to the human world 'propel protagonists into solidarity with the nonhuman world'" (qtd. in Haynes and Murris, "Philosophising" 297). It is striking that arguably the most explicit instance of a young reader demonstrating empathy transgresses the nature/culture binary to give an imagined inner-life to a tree that desires to inflict harm upon the main character for carving into its bark. I am not arguing here that Merlijn genuinely believes trees can think, but I do want to

point out the significance of a child reader being the only one demonstrating any level of empathy with the non-human.

The argument that "identity and similarity" (Whitehead 57) leads to empathy is complicated, because not all forms of similarity are likely to be equally important. One could assume that Merlijn (11) and Mathijs (9) are likely to show high(er) levels of empathy with Mina, as they are still in school and are close in age. However, aspects such as gender and personal interests, just to name two, will also condition the similarity that readers will experience. Ultimately, both brothers had little to say regarding things they had in common with Mina, with each only offering the briefest of remarks. Merlijn (11) noted that "she is always in that tree and I like that too"[194] whereas Mathijs (9) shared, while laughing: "when she eats spaghetti, that is something I like too."[195] Beyond these moments however, there were virtually no prompted memories or other remarks that indicated a level of overlap or similarity between the brothers and Mina. Instead, their replies aligned more with Tandoi's readers' assessments of Mina as a strange person. Merlijn (11) remarked that he "thought it was weird that Mina thinks the school is a prison,"[196] whereas Mathijs (9) commented more broadly on the presentation of the book as Mina's diary, saying that he "thought the diary to be a bit strange, because there were strange things in it. I would not write those things in there. I'd write other things."[197] Thus, the explicit empathy that Merlijn (11) shows towards the tree, is largely absent from the young readers' reflections on Mina. Their ambivalent position towards her as a strange character foreshadowed some of the complexities that emerged among adult readers, as I will now explore.

### 3.1.2.6 *Adult readers: memories of school and emotional (dis)connection*

All adult readers identified at least some form of overlap between themselves and Mina, based on their own personal memories. As I will show in this section, readers who could point to a higher number of overlapping memories between their own lives and Mina's story commented more on their empathy. However, simply claiming that more triggered memories lead directly to an increased empathic response oversimplifies some of the nuance that is present in the data. What emerged instead, was a complex interplay between the extent of readers' relevant memories, the nature of particular memories, and readers' emotions.

I am going to start this part of the analysis by focusing on Siena (30) and Empee (79), as there are several intriguing similarities between these two participants. First of all, despite having read *My Name Is Mina* in light of our memory-centric prompt, Siena and Empee

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[194] Original text: "zij altijd in die boom zat vond ik dat, dat vind ik ook leuk."

[195] Original text: "Als ze zo spaghetti eet, dan vind ik dat ook leuk, of zo die koekjes."

[196] Original text: "Ik vond het raar dat Nina de school een gevangenis vond."

[197] Original text: "Ik vond dat wel een beetje raar dat dagboek, want daar stonden zo rare dingen in. Ik zou dat daar niet in schrijven. Ik zou andere dingen daarin schrijven."

both spontaneously recalled additional memories as the interview went on. In at least two cases, these moments even caused them to reconsider an initial judgement of Mina as an unrealistic character. Siena (30), for example, started by arguing that Mina "was way more literate than I was at that age." However, upon reflecting in more detail on her own personal memories, she reconsidered: "I know that I was reading the Harry Potter books at that age and thinking about that now I think like '*holy fuck* Siena those are seriously big tomes to read at that age.' But thinking back, yeah I started reading those in the 4th year of primary school. I was born in November, so it does fit that I was in that age bracket."[198] We see the same process happening with Empee (79), who first found it unlikely that Mina gathered all her knowledge of Greek mythology from her own independent study. He pondered: "How would she know that story about the underworld as a nine-year old? How would she get that knowledge? Like what she writes, about descending into the underworld, somebody would have had to have told her. Then again, then again. I should reconsider, that thing about the underworld. I was also a young lad when I read the entire Greek mythology."[199]

Throughout the interview with Empee, his memories created a number of different tensions within his reading experience. For instance, the above example is not the only case in which his thoughts on Mina as a character clash with his autobiographical memories. Later in the interview, Empee remarked that he "couldn't imagine a nine-year-old child exclaiming that kind of philosophical perspective."[200] This was once again followed by an autobiographical reflection, this time centred on his grandchildren:

> Then again. Yeah. I have a grandson who is twelve […] And he has a nephew the same age. And they once went on a trip with the other grandpa. […] Afterwards that grandpa told me 'yeah I talked about life with the boys […] and I was actually surprised by how mature those young fellas are'. […] I don't see my grandsons being all that philosophical.[201]

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[198] Original text: "Ja, ze had wel een pak meer geletterdheid dan ik op die leeftijd. Ik weet dat ik op die leeftijd de Harry Potters aan het lezen was en als ik mij dat nu bedenk denk ik 'holy fuck Siena dat zijn al wel serieuze kanjers om op die leeftijd te gaan lezen.' Maar als ik daaraan terugdenk, ja ik ben dat in het 4de leerjaar beginnen lezen. Ik ben van november dus dat klopt eigenlijk wel dat ik ook in die leeftijd zat."

[199] Original text: "Dat ik zeg, hoe zou die dat verhaal van de onderwereld als kind van 9 jaar- Hoe zou die daar aan geraken? Dus hetgeen dat zij daar schrijft, over het afdalen in de onderwereld, dat moet haar iemand ingefluisterd hebben of zo. Alhoewel, alhoewel. […] Ik kom daar ook terug in mijn bedenkingen, dat geval van de onderwereld. Ik was ook nog een jonge knaap als ik heel de Griekse mythologie gelezen heb."

[200] Original text: "Ik kan me het eigenlijk niet voorstellen dat een kind van 9 jaar zo'n filosofie uit haar botten kan slaan."

[201] Original text: "Alhoewel, ja, [pauze] ik heb een kleinzoon van 12 jaar […]. En hij heeft een neefje die ook even oud is. En die zijn een keer met de andere grootva een keer op stap geweest[…]. En achteraf zei de bompa tegen mij: 'Ja, ik heb met die jongens en zo eens geklapt over het leven en […] ik stond eigenlijk versteld van hetgeen dat die jonge gastjes allemaal in zich hebben van maturiteit.' […]. Ik zie mijn kleinzonen niet zo'n filosofieën verkopen."

Despite this account by his fellow grandfather, and Empee's own acknowledgment of reading about Greek myths as a child, he continued to deem Mina an unrealistic character at best, and an abnormal child at worst. Empee's interview thus shows that readers can also reject memory-inspired overlap with characters.

He justified this rejection in part via his views on neurodivergence, which in turn are shaped by his memories of his youth and early adulthood, when those kinds of topics received little to no attention. At one point in the interview, Empee both diagnoses Mina with autism, and lightly lambasts the modern-day prevalence of those kinds of narratives.

> These days we have all these labels. Aspergers or autists or whatever. All sorts of things that didn't exist in the past. […] The idea of autists and Aspergers is something we never knew. They didn't exist. You had difficult children and stuff […] they were annoying. How they translate [the inner lives] of those children, that's a bit overblown or overdone.[202]

In a related dynamic, Empee reflected on his memories at several points to position himself as a normal student, who functioned well within the regular school system, in contrast to Mina who he characterizes as somewhat annoying and difficult. For example, in response to Mina's struggles with the SATs question, Empee reflected that, as a child, he "was a solid essay-writer. I remember when I was in the 5th year of primary school, we had to write essays. […] I wouldn't say I was the essay-champion, but I was good at it."[203] With some sense of pride, he also discussed being praised by a teacher for doing a particularly good job writing and illustrating one of his essays, and talked about his work on the student newspaper at his high school. In contrast, he summarized *My Name Is Mina* as the story of "a bit of a recalcitrant girl who over time is bolstered or socialized into normality."[204]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Empee demonstrated almost no explicit instances of empathy with Mina. At one point, Emma-Louise asked him if he felt connected to Mina in any way, to which he replied "no, well, I'm not going to say I felt a kind of camaraderie."[205] Later, he more broadly reflected that "none of this affected me really."[206] Nevertheless, there is at

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[202] Original text: "Tegenwoordig krijgt ge allemaal etiketten opgeplakt he. Een asperger of een autist of tut tut tut. Alle dingen die vroeger nooit niet bestonden. […] autisten en van die aspergers, enzovoort enzovoort, dat is ook iets dat wij nooit niet gekend hebben he. Dat bestond niet. Ge hadt ook wel moeilijke kinderen of zo dingen […] Hoe dat ze dat dan zo kunnen vertalen, dat lijkt mij toch allemaal overroepen, of overdone, ik zal het dan zo zeggen."

[203] Original text: "Ik was een goeie opstelschrijver. En ik herinnerde mij toen ommendekeer dat ik zelfs in het vierde, vijfde leerjaar, dan moesten wij opstellen schrijven. […] Ik was, ik zal niet zeggen 'opstelkampioen', maar ik kon toch goed opstellen en zo."

[204] Original text: "een dwarsliggertje komt in de loop van de jaren enzovoort toch ergens tot een bolstering, tot normalisatie van de socialisatie."

[205] Original text: "Nee, alleen, hoe zullen ze zeggen, ik ga niet zeggen een soort collegialiteit."

[206] Original text: "Het doet mij allemaal niets."

least one instance where he does show cognitive empathy, in the sense that he claims to understand Mina's perspective and why she reacts the way she does. Empee took Mina's side in the SATs discussion, arguing that between Mina and her teacher Miss Scullery "I understand [Mina] the most. I think she's absolutely right in saying 'this is all bullshit so I'll respond with my own bullshit' so to say. I sympathize with that."[207] It is interesting to note here that Empee's interpretation does not see Mina's SATs answer as creativity for the sake of creativity, but as a sort of vengeful refusal to accommodate her teacher. Beyond this moment, Empee generally remarks only on his disconnect from Mina, broadly supported by the various memories outlined above of him generally thriving in a school environment. Thus, although the act of reading *My Name Is Mina* prompted plenty of memories in Empee (79), the vast majority of them differed from what is portrayed in the book.

Similarly, Siena (30) can also be said to mainly disconnect from Mina through her own memories. While there was a bit of aforementioned overlap with Siena also climbing in trees as a child, by and large she mainly commented on how different she was from Mina both in terms of personality at that age, and her experiences. She – for example –offered the broad comment that she "never in [her] young life experienced such dramatic things as Mina did."[208] She also said that to be "that stubborn at that age […] I can't say I was like that at all when I was that age,"[209] and that "Mina is a solitary character. She has her adventures by herself and that wasn't the case for me."[210] As part of making these sorts of comments, she also directly admits "that is why there was a boundary for me to feel connected."[211] In other words, Siena identifies her different past and personality as a concrete factor in limiting her sense of connection with Mina.

Interestingly, Siena spontaneously shared the idea that you can care more about a character if you have things in common with them, as she has a better reader in mind for this book. She mentioned that "in primary school I knew someone who was obsessed with dinosaurs and would run around like a t-rex with his hands folded in. I thought like 'this would be a good book for him' just so he knows that he wasn't alone."[212] In that sense, Siena's view has some interesting similarities, but also notable differences when compared

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[207] Original text: "Ik snap die Nina het meeste. Ik geef haar groot gelijk he. Als ge zegt 'dat is hier flauwekul, al hetgeen dat hier rond mij om speelt.' Ik mag ook een keer mijn eigen flauwekul bovenhalen bij manier van spreken."

[208] Original text: "Ik heb nergens zo in mijn jong leven zo dramatische gebeurtenissen als Nina gehad."

[209] Original text: "Om op die leeftijd al zo eigenwijs te zijn […]. Dat kan ik mij van mijzelf nu niet echt gaan zeggen dat ik denk dat ik toen op die leeftijd al zo was."

[210] Original text: "Nina meer een alleenreiziger is. Zij gaat alleen op avontuur terwijl dat bij mij ook niet het geval was."

[211] Original text: "En daarom was er dan bij mij ook wel die scheidingslijn, om mij verbonden te gaan voelen."

[212] Original text: "Maar ik had in de lagere school iemand die heel geobsedeerd was door dinosaurussen en daar ook zijn handen naar vormden. Die eigenlijk een beetje als een T-rex aan het rondlopen was. En dan denk ik 'voor hem zou dat nog wel een tof boek geweest zijn.' Gewoon puur om te weten van 'ge zijt niet alleen, ge staat niet alleen'.

to Empee. They both essentially recognize Mina as being significantly different from themselves and identify that as a factor as to why they do not really empathize with her. However, where Empee tends to describe Mina in more negative terms, Siena nevertheless discusses Mina with a sense of admiration and sympathy. She comments on how "tough"[213] Mina is; admires her creativity and describes her as a "very strong character."[214]

Generally speaking, Siena also showed few to no instances of explicit empathy with Mina, instead emphasizing the distance between herself and the character. In one instance, she replies to Mina's appreciation for a skylark, with the comment: "I don't get it. It is a bird. It is just a dumb bird."[215] The one exception involved Siena demonstrating cognitive empathy with Mina's response to the SATs question, like Empee. Furthermore, she also identified a similar vindictive quality in Mina's response:

> I do kind of understand that she just wants to do her own thing and she realizes that she is antagonizing her teacher. She knows. But she's kind of like 'yeah just let me do my thing'.[216]

With Empee and Siena, it is difficult to identify any instance of affective empathy. At no point did either of them comment on feeling emotionally affected by Mina's plight. This was entangled with both essentially "othering" Mina. In Empee's case this happened through a lens of neurodivergence, whereas Siena more generally comments on Mina as a bit of a strange outsider, though one deserving of respect and friendship. The rare instances of cognitive empathy where they claimed to understand Mina's perspective are marked by them ascribing a vengeful nature to her that is not explicitly present in the text.

Barbara (38) serves as an interesting counterpoint to Empee (79) and Siena (30). Barbara was instantly enthusiastic about the book, commenting at the beginning of the interview that she "found it a very fun book and like really just a book made for me."[217] This was then reinforced throughout the interview with Barbara listing a comparatively much higher number of autobiographical elements in which she felt overlap with Mina. She remarked that she shared Mina's love for the natural history museum, which is her "favorite museum,"[218] and Mina's enjoyment of *We're Going On A Bear Hunt*, which was her favorite book as a child.[219] Additionally, Mina's adventures in nature reminded her of her

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[213] Original text: "zo stoer was ik niet"
[214] Original text: "heel sterk karakter"
[215] Original text: "Ik snap het niet. Dat is een vogel. Dat is gewoon een stomme vogel."
[216] Original text: "Ergens snap ik dat ook wel van hoe of wat want zij wil haar ding doen en ze beseft dat dan ook wanneer ze tegen de schenen gaat schoppen van de juf. Dat ze dat aan het doen is. Dus ze weet dat wel. Maar ze heeft wel ook zoiets van: " ja maar ja laat mij gewoon doen.""
[217] Original text: "een heel leuk boek en echt precies ook een boek voor mij."
[218] Original text: "het natuurhistorisch museum. Ja dat is mijn lievelingsmuseum"
[219] Original text: "Ze zegt op een gegeven moment ook het boek 'wij gaan op berenjacht' en dat is echt mijn lievelingsboek als kind geweest."

own childhood, saying that she "always brought binoculars and a small jar to put insects in for further research."[220] In contrast to Siena's (30) comments on her disconnect from Mina because of her personality, Barbara (38) was instead reminded of her child self: "I might sound naïve but I am very familiar with that sense of wonder and those questions you know. Those why-questions she asked at one point. I asked those so often as a child."[221]

Crucially, some of these memories, in particular Barbara's memories of school, involved strong emotions. Barbara told a story about how her primary school used a colour card system to grade student behaviour. The worst was the white card. If you received a white card, you were forced to pass through all classes (presumably to be shamed), and if this happened thrice you were expelled. Barbara reflected that she "really learned to not make any mistakes at all because of that. I had so much fear."[222] She added a further anecdote about visiting her teacher with tears in her eyes to beg for better grades so that she would receive a card with a better color. As such, the emotional component that was largely absent from Empee (79) and Siena's (30) responses emerged strongly with Barbara (38). Aside from her comments on fear, she also discussed feeling a sense of happiness as she was reading, referencing for instance that she "glad that Mina no longer had to go to that school and I actually felt that. I remembered telling my dad like 'I don't want to go to school' but I went back anyway."[223] Indeed, Barbara's wide range of memories, prompted by Mina's story and framed by her emotions, seemed to correlate with a high empathic response. Barbara argued that she "absolutely felt for her [Mina] regarding that awful school and the way her creativity is curtailed."[224]

Maurice Bloch has remarked "that nothing is ever completely forgotten that, under certain circumstances, cannot be recalled" (116). For Barbara, reading became a way to recall almost-forgotten memories, which then in turn lead her to empathize even more. In a longer reflection, Barbara shared that

> I think I could relate so hard to her. That part of me was kind of gone but by reading it again I thought 'hey I also felt that way'. Yeah, and I experienced very similar things and stuff. So yeah I could-. It came back to me. It was as if it had been

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[220] Original text: "had ook zo altijd een verrekijker mee en zo een potteke waar dat je zo een insect in kunt onderzoeken zo."

[221] Original text: "Dat kan soms naïef klinken maar ik ken dat wel heel hard zo die verwondering en die vragen hé. Op een gegeven moment die waarom vragen. Die heb ik als kind heel veel gesteld."

[222] Original text: "ik heb op school echt geleerd om geen fouten te maken daardoor. Omdat, ik had zoveel angst."

[223] Original text: "ik was blij dat Nina niet meer naar die school heeft moeten gaan dat voelde ik ook wel zo. Ik herinnerde mij dat ik tegen mijn papa ook echt zei van "ik wil niet meer naar die school" maar ja dat ik de volgende dag toch maar netjes terugging."

[224] Original text: "Zeker meevoelen met haar als het zo gaat over goh die vreselijke school en zo de manier waarop haar creativiteit wordt beknot."

covered up somehow. You know you were that age at one point but you cannot recall it that well but now suddenly only those thoughts came back.[225]

This example is particularly interesting in the broader context of the argument that literature promotes empathy. For Barbara, *My Name Is Mina* did not provide access to empathy by virtue of substitutive experience, it provided a set of memory-triggers from which Barbara drew for an empathic response that was buried somewhere within, though she had lost access to the requisite memories.

Interestingly, when we are concerned with the connection between memory and empathy, not all memories seem to be made equal. This becomes particularly salient when we zoom out and compare Barbara (38), Siena (30) and Empee (79). The strong emotions Barbara attaches to her memories of school can be put in explicit contrast with Empee's and Siena's memories about being part of the "in-group" at school, and – in Empee's case especially – thriving in his school environment. In comparing these three readers, we see that the memory of fitting in within the school system, or alternatively, of being more of an outcast, was significantly more important than other memories. Empee may have recalled having a fight with his principal – like Mina – while Siena remembered climbing trees – like Mina – but neither of these overlapping memories carried close to the same weight as Barbara's memories of being the odd one-out in primary-school, and the genuine fear and sadness that was attached to those particular memories. Where Empee recalled with a modicum of pride how well he could write essays, Barbara reflected on her distaste for "the way they handled students because for some students that absolutely worked but it did not for me."[226]

### 3.1.2.7 *Concluding thoughts on readers' memories and empathy*
Without making claims about the generalizability of these findings, the data does point to some connection between memory, emotion and empathy. In this concluding section, I want to draw some of these threads together, with help from Gubar's notion of (intergenerational) kinship. At several points in this thesis, I have referred to Gubar's advocacy for the adoption of a kinship model of childhood, in which the point is to stress that adults and children are "fundamentally akin to one another, even if certain differences or deficiencies routinely attend certain parts of the aging process" ("Hermeneutics" 299). The point is – in part – that shifting away from emphasizing difference, and towards recognizing similarity, may not only help discover "material traces of children's agency that might otherwise go uncollected, unanalyzed, missing", but that this may also lead to a

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[225] Original text: "Ja ik denk dat ik mij heel hard kon relateren met haar of zo. Dat dat stuk dat dat beetje weg was en door dat terug te lezen dacht ik: "ah maar ik heb mij ook zo gevoeld op-." Ja heel gelijkaardige dingen meegemaakt of zo. Dus ja ik kon dat wel-. Dat kwam terug of zo. Het was of dat er een laagje op ligt omdat je dat-. Ja je weet dat je die leeftijd hebt gehad maar je kunt dat niet zo goed terughalen maar nu kwamen die gedachtes bijna terug."

[226] Original text: "De manier waarop dat die met leerlingen omgingen want voor sommige leerlingen werkte dat wel heel hard hé maar voor mij niet."

better treatment of children in the first place ("Hermeneutics" 301). Simply put, a kinship model of childhood asks adults to not look at children as less-than or different from them, but as quite similar and consequently deserving of equal respect (Gubar, "Hermeneutics" 304).

Although this set of interviews was not explicitly intended to limit its scope to one child character, *My Name Is Mina* primarily prompted readers to recall childhood memories, which produced fascinating insights into adults (not) feeling kinship with Mina, a child character. The book also contains several adult characters but these prompted comparatively few memories. The data and analyses presented in this section offer an interesting addendum to Gubar's argument, in the sense that in the process of exploring empathy, these interviews inadvertently also revealed the complex dynamics that may prohibit adult readers from feeling a sense of kinship with child characters, despite having much in common on paper.

The idea of kinship is closely entwined with the argument that empathy is at least partially contingent on the reader experiencing a sense of "recognition" (Stening and Stening 288), "identity" and "similarity" (Whitehead 57) with a character. All adult readers that I interviewed had been children at some point, and thus could be expected to feel *some* kinship with Mina in the most general of terms. However, what we saw instead was that basic general overlap in experiences such as going to school, climbing trees and having arguments with teachers did not prompt enough of a sense of kinship for Siena (30) and Empee (79) to deeply empathize with or feel connected to Mina. In Empee's case, he even explicitly disregarded part of the similarity he identified between himself, his grandchildren and Mina. I previously quoted Anne Whitehead's argument that empathy "is prone to exclusion and ethnocentrism" when we are asked to empathize with someone with whom we have little in common (57). With Empee, we see that even in cases where there are notable similarities between reader and character, of which the reader claims to be explicitly aware, these can still be consciously disregarded, especially if they bump against ways in which the character feels foreign to the reader. In a way, this shows that Gubar's argument that "children and adults are fundamentally akin to one another" ("Hermeneutics" 299) may be true, but that for strong intergenerational empathy and connection to work, specific instances of kinship derived from shared strong emotional experiences or feelings are critical. These serve as "affective traces" that can "'fix' memories more securely" (92), thus assisting with later recall (Waller 90-92), and furthermore, forming a more solid foundation for empathic responses.

Note, for example, the specific emotional anchors that Barbara (38) relied on. She explicitly references fear and other emotions as key themes throughout her own memories, which then shaped her reading experience and led to – specifically – affective empathy. Although Empee and Siena can be said to demonstrate cognitive empathy via their agreement with Mina's perceived vengeful reply to Miss Scullery's request for a normal essay, an emotional

response was absent, as was any form of affective empathy. In contrast, much of Barbara's empathy was affective, as she consistently reflected on the emotional impact of what she was reading and remembering. This shows that "recognition of […] prior (or current) experience" (Stening and Stening 288) is no guarantee in and of itself for a strong empathic response. There are other compounding factors at play.

Crucially, however, the data also shows that children's literature can lead to the reawakening of childhood memories, which then in turn may contribute to intergenerational empathy and kinship. Barbara (38) described at least some of her empathic response as being contingent on childhood memories that she was no longer aware of at the start of her participation. These were then reawakened as part of the reading experience. The particularly emotional nature of some of these memories is also consistent with empirical research that points to the entanglement of emotions and forgotten memories (Bloch 116). In that regard, children's literature may have real potential to reinvigorate adult empathy for (fictional) children. Naturally, not every children's book will prompt significant memories in every adult reader, but my data does point to the possibility for the right children's book to lead an adult reader to empathize from a place of deeply personal experience that had been previously unavailable.

I also recognize that – as long as a child character features prominently – the dynamics I outline above may potentially also result from the reading of literature in general, and not just children's literature. However, some of the same distinctive features that make children's literature so suitable for a research project on age, may also engender this empathic, memory-driven response. Specifically, child characters in fiction for adults tend to be written with the intent that the (adult) reader reads "through and beyond" them, which is not (or at least, less) the case in children's literature (Nodelman 195-196). This different approach to writing child characters may contribute to the reawakening of the distinctly child-like sensibility that Barbara attests *Mina* prompted in her. That being said, it would be feasible to apply the methodology I used in this section to do empirical research with literature for adult readers that prominently features child characters, to explore if there are significant differences in readers' empathic responses.

In any case, my research offers some indirect empirical support for the idea that reading fiction does indeed promote empathy. The mechanism I observe here is, however, more complicated than the narrative directly leading to empathy, as some scholars suggest (e.g. Mar and Oatley 181; see also Stephens vi; Whitehead 55). Instead, beyond direct empathic stimulation, fiction may also prompt the reader to remember long forgotten memories, which then in turn can further contribute to the empathic reaction.

As for the younger readers, the two brothers' position both echoes some of the views of the adult readers, while adding distinctly unique aspects as well. What set the brothers apart the most, was the entanglement between their imagination and memory, which caused them to expand empathy and memory further than the adult readers, and led

Merlijn (11) in particular to empathize with the non-human. In doing so, their responses were in line with scholars' comments on the entanglement between memory and imagination in children on the one hand (Klingberg 35), and with children's potential to empathize with an "ecological other" (Haynes and Murris, "Philosophising" 297) on the other. In the case of Merlijn's empathy with the tree, he also shows some overlap with Barbara (38) regarding the importance of strong emotions. Even though Merlijn demonstrated cognitive empathy – in the sense that he did not feel these emotions himself but claimed to understand them – his empathy was rooted in him imagining the tree being filled with murderous rage, even at the cost of its own safety. At the same time, this strong emotional connection to the tree is contrasted by a general disconnect from Mina by both Mathijs (9) and Merlijn (11). Beyond superficial overlap, neither of the brothers reflected on any memories that prompted a sense of empathy or a broader emotional connection to Mina. Arguably, Merlijn (11) felt a higher level of kinship with the tree than with Mina, which supported his empathy. Thus, the brothers were unique in terms of the imaginativeness of their replies, while having a disconnect with Mina in common with Empee (79) and Siena (30).

In closing, this section has explored the memories that are prompted in readers of all ages during a reading of *My Name Is Mina*, and the entanglement of those memories with the ways in which readers empathize with characters, specifically Mina herself. One of the main takeaways is that my data did not demonstrate a direct link between age, memory and empathy. Instead, the dynamics that emerged were much more complicated, and underlined the importance of emotion as a catalyst for the retention of memory, and the ways in which memory may then consequently lead to empathy. Furthermore, the lack of connection felt by most readers, in spite of comments about experiencing similar events as Mina, prompts interesting questions about intergenerational kinship. Rather than a general kinship rooted in broad, age-group defining experiences such as school, distinct individual events became a much stronger factor in making readers feel kinship, and by extension, empathy. At the same time, (children's) literature may also have potential for addressing concerns about a lack of intergenerational kinship, by stimulating empathy – either directly or via the reinvigoration of readers' forgotten childhood memories and their emotional weight.

### 3.1.3 Reader -> Book: Concluding thoughts

Throughout chapter 3.1., I have paused at several instances to summarize results and reflect on what I consider to be the most important concrete takeaways of my analyses. In this final brief reflective passage, I want to avoid repeating myself too much. Instead, I will zoom out more than I have done before, and reflect on this chapter in its entirety. In the introduction to chapter 3, I argued that the best way to envision my analysis as a whole is as a selection of entry points into a rhizomic network. Such a network "allows for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data representation and interpretation" (Ahnert et

al. 26). I found this approach to be the most useful and practical, seeing as qualitative data is "unpredictable, flexible, and messy" (Brinkmann et al. 39). Simply put, there was no straightforward beginning and end to the story that I wished to tell. Readers' responses to age and children's literature encompassed a vast web of interrelated topics. Thus, to open a first doorway into this complexity, I pitched this chapter as being all about the reader, i.e. the knowledge, experiences, pre-existing mental structures, thoughts, beliefs and so on, that the reader brings to the reading experience. Coming now to the end of this first – and largest – section of my thesis, I am left with some thoughts.

Academic writing as a medium often forces us to subdivide complex and interrelated phenomena into bite-sized chunks that are more fit for discussion. In my case, I made a cut between age norms and memories as two separate topics that fit under the larger label of "reader-centred" meaning-making. Age norms were then further subdivided into more specific topics. While I stand by that structure, I acknowledge that this format may have also given the impression that the dynamics outlined in distinct sections do not interact with one another, while they are in fact all part of an intricate and multifaceted meaning-making process.

Take, for instance, the importance of "emotions." As I demonstrated in the last section of this broader chapter, the emotional weight attached to memories influenced the significance of those memories for the sake of engendering empathy with a character. However, though I did not thematize this as explicitly in other sections, emotions mattered greatly there as well. I think – for example – of the gratitude with which older readers point to wisdom as a source for serenity and peace, or the sadness and regret with which adult readers reflected on their lost imagination and fantasy. In turn, when readers explored where these emotions came from, they often did so by building explicitly and implicitly on broader societal narratives on age, such as the beings vs. becomings perspective. Observations from earlier chapters also remained relevant for later analyses. Readers' memories were often supplemented with reflections grounded in age norms. When Barbara (38) described a connection between herself and Mina, she worried that she "might sound naïve,"[227] a description also used by readers such as Helena (28), when talking about the childhood innocence of *Iep!*'s Loetje. In addition, some topics could have been explored further. For example, innocence, wisdom, imagination and fantasy were far from the only age norms that readers reflected on. The proper age for marriage and starting a family, for instance, informed various analyses of characters. Readers also often commented on *Iep!*'s illustrations, and had a lot to say about fatherhood in *Voor altijd samen, amen*.

That being said, this incompleteness is an unavoidable part of investigating how readers make meaning. As I highlighted in my theoretical framework, reader-response research has

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[227] Original text: "kan soms naïef klinken"

been subject to the criticism that "there are (at least potentially) as many experiences as there are readers, and that therefore the decision to focus on the reader is tantamount to giving up the possibility of saying anything that would be of general interest" (Fish 4). In light of such claims, a challenge reader-response research faces is demonstrating that this "proliferation of interpretations" (Culler 52) is not an impediment, but rather a fascinating window into socio-cultural meaning-making processes – even though it is impossible to account for all of them.

This thesis as a whole aims to investigate how the age of the real readers affects the understanding of age in fiction for young readers. The chief takeaway of chapter 3.1., for the purposes of answering this question, is that readers' ages do not have a straightforward one-to-one impact on their perspective on age in children's literature in a way that is generalizable to an entire age cohort. Instead, each section in this first chapter has highlighted smaller-scale dynamics that all contribute to the broader meaning-making process. This ranges from some young readers playing into constructions of innocent childhood to escape punishment, while still using that age norm to argue that some characters are younger than others, to readers reflecting on deeply personal childhood memories from an adult perspective to interpret a child character, to older readers conceiving of old-age imagination and fantasy as signs of dementia or mental illness, just to pick three examples. I have summarized these in the individual conclusions of section 3.1.1. and 3.1.2.

In closing, this section started from the reader as the vantage point to conduct its analyses. As Iris Van der Tuin remarks, however, "identity materializes in encounters" (13). [228] Readers did not unilaterally levy their pre-existing ideas, cognitive structures and beliefs on the literature. Instead, there was give and take. Readers questioned their ideas in response to what they read as well, or were prompted to actively consider ideologies that normally operated at the back of their minds and were left unquestioned. Thus, despite starting from the reader, "the interaction between reader and text appears", to return to Schneider, "above all, as a dynamic process" ("Construction" 608). The next section of this dissertation flips the dynamic and starts from the book as the vantage point of the analysis.

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[228] Original text: "Identiteiten materialiseren in ontmoetingen"

## 3.2 Book -> Reader: Extraordinary Activities[229]

Before I delve into my analysis here, I want to briefly explore where this section stands vis-à-vis the prior discussions. As I highlighted in the introduction of chapter 3, the different subsections that I identify in the data and consequently use to rationalize partitioning this whole chapter into three parts are, to an extent, artificial. They align with academic discourse that emphasizes the difference between top-down dynamics (e.g. literary meaning-making drawn from readers' own memories) and bottom-up dynamics (e.g. literary meaning-making drawn from concrete textual excerpts). However, as part of that very same discourse, scholars also recognize that such neat divisions are rare in readers' actual encounters with literature, which are much more interactive and muddy (Schneider, "Reception" 120). Thus, I have previously framed the difference between sections 3.1. and 3.2. as them representing unique entry points in the same rhizomic network of data, instead of utterly distinct and incompatible analyses. Simply put, in the prior section, our vantagepoint was the reader, from whom we looked towards the book. Thus, my analyses mostly adopted a top-down perspective. In this next analysis, the book becomes the vantagepoint from which we look toward the reader. This is therefore more in line with a bottom-up analysis.

That being said, I do want to clarify what "starting from the book" means for the upcoming discussion. There are distinct nuances between this section and the previous one that go beyond my personal choice to thematize certain topics and downplay others, and extend into methodology. Although it can be difficult to disentangle bottom-up and top-down dynamics in readers' actual encounters with literature, researchers' approaches can be tailored to engender certain kinds of responses. Schneider remarks that "the interaction between textual information and readers' prior knowledge […] will depend on the conceptual and methodological tool kit brought to the task by theorists and researchers" ("Reception" 119).

By and large, the section on *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen* was the product of an open-ended and broad approach that had emphasized readers from the start. Before I chose a book to work with, or had designed my first interview guide, I developed a list of specific research questions and more general topics (e.g. meta-reflections, age norms, character ranking exercises,…) that I wanted to focus on, drawn from age studies, reader-response studies and children's literature criticism. I was curious to explore these topics and questions via readers' responses, and decided to look for books in the CAFYR corpus that would facilitate that endeavour. As a result, *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen* were chosen to serve these pre-existing ideas. Thus, from the beginning, my gaze for those interviews was aimed at the reader first and foremost, with the books being a means to an end. By

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[229] This section has been published as a chapter in an edited volume on David Almond (Duthoy, "Exploration")

virtue of a set of interview guides that covered a wide range of topics, I then gathered rich but also heterogeneous data. Although much thought went into selecting *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen* for these initial interviews, other books could have achieved similar results. The same is mostly true for the section on readers' memories and *My Name Is Mina*. Emma-Louise Silva and I were interested in exploring the role of memory in readers' responses, and opted to work with *Mina* because it served that purpose.

My analysis in the following section represents the opposite approach. From my first reading of David Almond's *My Name Is Mina*, I was struck by the potential of the book's built in "extraordinary activities" as a source for fascinating reader-response data. Thus, instead of developing a more general list of topics to explore and then picking a book afterwards that fits those aforementioned topics the best, I decided to work with this book first, and then developed a set of specific interview questions that capitalized on its unique aspects. In doing so, concrete textual elements, i.e., the extraordinary activities, are taken as the starting point to then look towards readers' responses. Hence, this section explores research question 3: "**How do readers of different ages engage with the extraordinary activities that are included in David Almond's *My Name Is Mina*?**"

I will begin my discussion of this interview-cycle with a brief review of what the extraordinary activities were, how they fit within *My Name Is Mina* as a narrative, and how I approached the interviews themselves. Compared to the previous section, there will be less theoretical background, largely due to the more focused nature of the entire interview and analysis cycle in the first place. Concepts such as "innocence" and "fantasy" are inherently nuanced, were sometimes only implicitly present in the data and needed context. This necessitated comparisons and analyses across entire interviews. In contrast, my analysis of the extraordinary activities will more often work via direct one-to-one comparisons of readers' responses to individual questions.

### 3.2.1 *My Name Is Mina* and its extraordinary activities

*My Name Is Mina* has been called a "hybrid" novel. These kinds of novels "draw attention to themselves as artefacts in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" and make "use of the book's potential to engage readers visually and kinaesthetically as a means of contesting the supremacy of written language" (Tandoi, "Hybrid" 330). The hybridity found in *My Name Is Mina* is a product of its presentation as the actual notebook and diary written by the main character. One aspect of that presentation is the included extraordinary activities. These are various assignments that the main character Mina presents to the reader, such as "stand beneath a streetlamp. Dance and glitter in a shaft of light" or "Write a sentence which fills a whole page [and] write a single word at the center of a page." Tandoi observes that hybrid novels "invite readers to engage actively with texts" ("Hybrid" 333). *Mina's* extraordinary activities are a case in point, as readers are invited to perform creative acts and produce items which are—to push the term a bit—also hybrid in nature, as a meeting point between a particular

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"real" reader and their own creative drives and impulses, and a fictional character's intradiegetic reasons for proposing those same activities. The final product carries something of both the reader and the fictional character.

The extraordinary activities drew me to *My Name Is Mina* for two reasons. On the one hand, there is the aforementioned shift from a top-down to a bottom-up approach. By asking readers to complete as many of the extraordinary activities as possible, I had an opportunity to explore what a set of concrete textual excerpts can produce in a set of distinct readers. Naturally, this was still likely to involve top-down meaning-making to a large degree, but it shifted the impetus of the interview from generally broader questions about (among other topics) favourite characters and characters' interactions with one another, to highly specific explorations of what a specific assignment by a character prompts in a reader. A second reason that I was drawn to the extraordinary activities was that they provided a built-in opportunity to explore readers' creative responses to a text. While I had achieved many interesting results using a standard semi-structured interview approach, the activities would ask readers to create various forms of art. This would open a whole additional layer of analysis that I theretofore had not yet been able to explore.

I was inspired here in particular by Fjällström and Kokkola, who had achieved interesting results by avoiding classic question-answer interviews and instead giving readers an opportunity to produce creative responses to a text. Using a short story, Fjällström and Kokkola explored "how adolescent readers actually respond to fictional characters, and the extent to which they may be swayed into adopting the narrative's world view" (395). They asked a group of 35 sixteen-year-old students to "rewrite the narrative from the perspective of one of the non-focalised characters" (396). By having readers actively produce a new text in response to a story, certain aspects of their reading experience can be considered from a different angle. For instance, while you can simply ask a sixteen-year-old reader to reflect on their perspective on an adult character, you can also explore how they write a story from that adult character's perspective and this may produce a richer image. As Fjällström and Kokkola note, based on their participants' written stories, "the fact that many struggled to comprehend the adult mind, but few had difficulties with sibling rivalry, suggests that they are drawing on personal experience, which signals that dismissing immersive identification out of hand is overly simplistic" (408).

This led me to organize a set of interviews with 5 readers of different ages, who were asked to read *My Name Is Mina* and complete as many of the extraordinary activities as possible. I outline my approach in more detail in the methodological section of this thesis, but briefly summarized: readers were sent a copy of the book and a small notebook in which they could draw and write whatever they wanted in response to the assignments. The table below outlines the relevant information on the participants of this set of interviews.

| Pseudonym | Age | Sex |
|---|---|---|
| Michiel | 12 | M |
| Leen | 30 | F |
| Marie | 46 | F |
| Griet | 58 | F |
| Astrid | 68 | F |

*Table 4: participants for the* My Name Is Mina *extraordinary activities interviews*

Most of *Mina's* extraordinary activities involve acts of creative expression such as "Stare at Dust that Dances in the Light." One activity overlaps somewhat with what Fjällström and Kokkola asked their participants to do: "Write a story about yourself as if you're writing about somebody else" and "Write a story about somebody else as if you're writing about yourself."

In contrast with Fjällström and Kokkola's approach in which participation was part of the "mandatory" schoolwork of a group of teenage students, my participants were repeatedly told that any reason not to complete an activity was valid, although they would be asked to explain why. I chose this approach partially because of the practical reality that it is not possible (nor perhaps advisable) to make an assignment "mandatory" with volunteer readers, but also because I was interested in the reasoning behind readers' choices not to engage with certain activities. I felt that some activities seemed more likely to trigger a sense of silliness that some readers would struggle with, such as "Go to the loo. Flush your pee away. Consider where it will go to and what it will become." In the end, every reader skipped at least one extraordinary activity for one reason or another. For instance, only one reader completed the activity: "Stand beneath a streetlamp. Dance and glitter in a shaft of light." In contrast, there were also a handful of activities which tended to evoke more extensive and deeply personal reflections among readers—especially the writing exercises, where participants created short stories or little bits of poetry. Readers of all ages generally seemed to enjoy talking about these activities the most, and these therefore generated more data than others.

Through discussing their encounter with *My Name Is Mina* and its extraordinary activities, readers offered rich reflections on their ideas about age, their own lives, reading histories, and their thoughts on children's literature in general. In the next sections, I engage with this data through a handful of different angles. My intent throughout each subsection of this analysis is to highlight how readers of different ages confront these activities, with an emphasis on how their age plays an explicit and implicit role. To support my analyses, I continue to build on several of the theoretical concepts that I have introduced throughout

this thesis, such as Gubar's kinship model, and the notions of "being" vs. "becoming." Two of the more prominent concepts put forth by readers, "shame" and "space," will serve as guiding principles for the first of my analyses. Next, I turn to the stories written by the oldest readers Griet (58) and Astrid (68) in response to the aforementioned story-writing extraordinary activities. While all readers engaged with the story-writing activities, they were the only ones who were willing to share their texts with me. Moreover, in these texts, both readers thematize age and ageing. In my reading and analyses of these stories in the final part of this chapter, I draw comparisons with Mina's own intradiegetic, third-person story.

## 3.2.2 Age, space and embarrassment

At the start of my interview with Leen (30), I asked her if she believed there were any likely differences between younger and older readers in completing Mina's activities. She replied that among readers of all ages, many would prefer not to do the activities, but "the motivation might be different. I think that children will tend to skip them because they are not in the mood or don't know where to start, while adults will tend to skip them because they don't have time or because they think the activities are a bit silly."[230] Though she did not immediately connect this observation to herself, it resembles how she talks about her own experience. For example, she discussed the struggle of finding time to read due to her adult responsibilities, and reflected how: "back in the day when I was younger I could read a whole Sunday afternoon, while being more focused without being distracted so easily."[231] In contrast, she now mainly found the time to read on her commute to work by train: "that's two 45-minute trips for me to read, which is a nice bit of time and ensures I can still read quite a bit."[232] Leen's reading experience is thus entwined with that particular location, and is more or less driven by her work schedule. In that context, she suggested that deeply engaging with literature as a working adult is more difficult because "finding the time is a problem [...] as adults we all have many responsibilities."[233] Talking about what it means to read almost exclusively on trains, Leen added: "You can't lose yourself in

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[230] Original text: "Ik denk dat de motivatie ervoor misschien anders zou zijn. Ik denk dat kinderen ze misschien meer niet zouden doen omdat ze er geen zin in hebben of omdat ze misschien niet weten hoe dat eraan te beginnen of zo, terwijl dat volwassenen ze misschien meer niet zouden doen omdat ze er geen tijd voor hebben of omdat ze ze een beetje onnozel vinden."

[231] Original text: "Vroeger toen dat ik jonger was kon ik bijvoorbeeld een hele zondagnamiddag lezen en dat geconcentreerder met minder afleiding."

[232] Original text: "Dat is twee keer drie kwartier, dus dat zijn wel mooie tijden en dat zorgt ervoor dat ik wel redelijk wat kan lezen."

[233] Original text: "Ik denk dat het gewoon een probleem van tijd zou zijn om dat te doen want ik denk dat dat niet zou terugkomen op een namiddag of zo en allee als volwassen mensen hebben we allemaal veel verantwoordelijkheden."

the book because you have to make sure that you don't miss your stop. There's also always people around you. […] It creates a unique reading experience."[234]

It was that implicit social context, being surrounded by strangers on a train, that Leen (30) identified as stopping her from completing some of the extraordinary activities: "I did feel a tad self-conscious at times. I think that if I'd read the book at home that I would have completed more of the activities."[235] I asked her whether she felt that that sense of shame was age-related. She added that while she always was a "very self-conscious child […] I feel like children are a bit less prone to that."[236] These thoughts on her own age and reflections on her physical surroundings returned in her execution of the extraordinary activities. When I asked about the story-writing activities, Leen opted to paraphrase the story she had written instead of reading it out loud, and summarised it as "being about nothing, just about the train, that it is delayed sometimes, but that it also brings peace. That I'm always happy when we arrive at our destination."[237] When prompted to explain how she felt about engaging with this activity, Leen's insights further expanded on her prior reflections of what adulthood and childhood mean(t) to her:

> It was [pauses] difficult. It was fun to do in a way, but it was also hard. I had very little inspiration and I see that my story is about the train, so I clearly had very little inspiration [laughs]. I also found it a little bit confronting as well. I think that I would have been better at this in the past. Making up stories and stuff.[238]

Leen's reflection on this activity is thus contingent on several age-based discourses which intersect and feed back into each other: her busy adult life which leaves her with little time to read, reading on the train, and the social awkwardness about doing specific tasks in a public setting. These factors also played a part in her choice not to complete some of the activities. Moreover, for the activities she did complete, she reflected with a twinge of sadness about how her progression into adulthood seems to have negatively affected her inspiration, or ability to write long stories.

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[234] Original text: "Je kan je gelijk minder volledig verliezen in het boek omdat je toch terug moet zorgen dat je je halte niet mist, je hebt ook nog altijd mensen rond jou. […] Het maakt inderdaad wel voor een uniekere, enfin, unieke ervaring."

[235] Original text: "Ik voelde mij zo wel wat selfconscious soms. Ik denk dat als ik het thuis had gelezen, dat ik er meer van had gedaan."

[236] Original text: "ik was zelf een zeer selfconscious kind […] mijn gevoel is dan dat ik zou zeggen dat kinderen daar net iets minder last van hebben."

[237] Original text: "Het gaat eigenlijk over helemaal niets, het gaat gewoon over de trein en dat de trein soms vertraging heeft en dat de trein ook wel rust brengt, dat ze, dus ik, altijd blij ben als we op de bestemming zijn, dus het gaat eigenlijk echt wel gewoon over niets."

[238] Original text: "Dat was [pauze] lastig, allee, dat was ergens leuk om te doen maar ik vond dat ook moeilijk, ik had gelijk weinig inspiratie en ik zie dus dat het over de trein gaat, dus ik had duidelijk zeer weinig inspiratie [lacht]. Ja ik denk dat, ik vond dat een beetje confronterend, ik denk dat dat vroeger makkelijk zou gegaan zijn. Zoiets verzinnen ofzo."

Several of these themes also returned implicitly and explicitly in other readers' approaches to the activities. Marie (46), for instance, shared almost the exact same sentiment about children being more comfortable with completing some of the activities because they have a less developed sense of shame. This emerged strongly in our discussion of the following extraordinary activities:

EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

(DAYTIME VERSION)

Touch the tip of the index finger to the tip of the thumb, making a ring. Look through the ring into the sky.* See the great emptiness there. Contemplate this emptiness. Wait Don't move. Perhaps there is a tiny dot in the emptiness, which is a skylark singing so high up that it's almost out of sight. Perhaps not. Perhaps there really is just emptiness. Sooner or later a bird will appear for a second in your view and will fly away. Something appears in nothing, and then disappears. Keep looking. Sooner or later another bird will appear to take its place. Keep looking. It may be that several birds appear together. Keep looking. Keep looking. Allow the extraordinary sky into your mind. Consider the fact that your head is large enough to contain the sky. That is all, and it is hardly anything at all. No need to write anything down unless you would like to. Just remember. And wonder. And do the activity again when you have a moment. Do not worry about staring into space. It is an excellent thing to do.


EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

(NIGHTTIME VERSION)

Touch the tip of the index finger to the tip of the thumb, making a ring. Look through the ring into the sky.* See the great abundance there. Contemplate this abundance: the stars and galaxies, the planets, the great great darkness, the stars so far away in time and space they look like scatterings of silver dust. Consider the unimaginable amount of space and time that is circled by the ring you have made. Consider that this unimaginable amount is just a tiny fragment of the universe, of eternity. Keep looking. Keep looking. Things will move across your vision: a flickering bat, a swooping owl; the high-up light of an airplane, the slow slow flashing of a satellite. Keep looking. Keep looking. Allow the abundant night into your mind. Consider the fact that your head is large enough to contain the night. That is all, and it is hardly anything at all. No need to write anything down unless you would like to. Just remember. And wonder. And do the activity again when you have a moment. Do not worry about staring into the dark. It is an excellent thing to do.

EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

Go to the loo. Flush your pee away.

Marie (46) found it particularly difficult to engage with these activities because she "did think like: 'look at me doing this stuff'."[239] She added that it "requires you to leave your comfort zone. I would normally never do something like this."[240] As with Leen, I asked Marie if she connected her own age to this sentiment. She readily replied: "yeah I can imagine that children will think less about how silly or crazy doing this makes you look. That they spend less time thinking 'look at how I'm making a fool of myself.'"[241] Moreover, even though Marie read the book at home, and thus did not suffer the same level of social scrutiny as Leen felt on the train, Marie nevertheless remarked how she

> thinks so much about 'what will others think of me' when I do things. And even though I am home alone, that thought sticks with me. I can imagine that as you grow older, that those thoughts dissipate a bit. That you are more like 'screw it I'm doing my own thing', and care less about how crazy you look.[242]

I explored Marie's struggle with these thoughts in more detail and was struck by her own insight into where these feelings came from. She shared that she had distinct memories of being increasingly criticised for behaviour that did not comply with norms for proper adult behaviour as she progressed into adulthood, and that younger children have not yet received that negative feedback, so that they will not have such a sense of shame. In her words: "it's very clear in my case that I just heard so often: 'you don't do that as an adult' and 'come on, act like an adult' and yeah as a child you obviously haven't heard that as much yet."[243]

In addition to the shame tied to the spatial and social context of the activities, the idea of "self-consciousness" operates in the background of this whole discussion: the OED defines self-consciousness fairly generally as "Consciousness of one's own existence, identity, sensations, etc.; self-awareness." In the case of Marie's struggles, there is an underlying tension of feeling aware of a particularly *adult* identity, as she reflects on how she was told to "act like an adult," an internalized age norm which she felt unable to separate herself

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[239] Original text: "ik wel zoiets van 'zie mij hier nu staan.'"

[240] Original text: "Ja omdat het u echt wel helemaal iets doet doen dat helemaal uit uw comfortzone zit. Iets dat je normaal echt nooit doet."

[241] Original text: "Ja ik kan mij dat wel voorstellen dat je als kind daar minder bij stilstaat van hoe idioot of gek dat je daar staat. Dat je daar minder mee bezig bent van 'hoe sta ik hier nu en zo'."

[242] Original text: "Ik denk nogal heel veel na over 'wat gaan anderen van mij denken' als ik dit of dat doe. En ook al ben ik dan alleen thuis, blijft die gedachte daar dan steken. En ik kan mij wel voorstellen dat die naarmate dat je ouder wordt dat dat wel wat vermindert zo. Dat je dan wel meer zoiets hebt van 'foert ik doe mijn eigen ding.' En dat je daar minder bij stilstaat van hoe gek je daar staat."

[243] Original text: "Bij mij is het heel duidelijk dat ik heel vaak gehoord heb 'dat doe je niet als volwassene'. En 'gedraag u nu eens volwassen.' En ja als kind heb je dat sowieso nog minder gehoord."

from as she attempted to engage with Mina's extraordinary activities, even in the privacy of her own home. Shame, self-consciousness and age have a long history of entanglement. The oldest source the OED cites for "self-consciousness" is a 1646 text that suggests "shame hath its sourse [sic] within." This entanglement has also been invoked in constructions of childhood and adulthood. In Romantic idealisations of childhood, the "original state" is admired for its innocence and consequent lack of shame. Children represented "a point of imaginative escape from the regularizing effects of (proto-) capitalist rationality, encapsulating innocence, simplicity, wonder, and a connection to sensation and emotion that is thought to be lost to adulthood" (Faulkner 131). On a similar note, James Kincaid argued that "the good child's innocence is figured as shamelessness: like Adam and Eve in the garden, naked and proud of it" (223). This shamelessness is tied to a lack of self-awareness or self-consciousness, which Kincaid also finds in constructions of childhood in some children's classics. Writing about Peter Pan, he suggests that his "identity is whole, focused, absolutely assured: 'There never was a cockier boy' […]. He holds his body cocked and ready, struts, asserts his being unself-consciously, happily exposed" (282).

As a counterpart to this image of childhood as a time of innocent shamelessness, adulthood tends to be envisioned as a rational and self-conscious state that has also been idealised in its own right. Neil Postman remarks how some educators and philosophers have historically ascribed to children "the status of 'barbarian,' […] unformed adults who need to be civilized" (50). That civilization process entailed "inducing a sense of shame in the young, without which they could not gain entry into adulthood" (50). Allison James and Alan Prout write how "self-conscious subjects" are not simply the result of biological processes, but are "produce[d]" specifically through "institutionalized practices" (22). Shame and embarrassment can function as social mechanisms that make people conform to age norms. Laz, for example, argues that "we situate ourselves vis-a-vis these images [of age] and as a consequence feel guilty or proud, ashamed or delighted, at our ability to 'measure up'" (104). While shame can be part of a personal reflection (i.e. you can be ashamed of your own actions), it can also be a tool for social conformity. We try to avoid being shamed by living up to accepted images of age, or shame others for failing to do so.

Marie (46) and Leen (30) touch upon topics that age scholars have also explored in cultural constructions of age and the role of shame and self-consciousness in that construction. More specifically, both share an embarrassment rooted in an imagined reaction of (hypothetical) others, motivated by an internalized awareness of how they *should* act as "normal" adults. Shame is both used as a tool for policing conformity to age norms, while simultaneously being an age norm in and of itself. Marie (46) and Leen (30) express some regret for having internalised these concepts. Marie in particular points out the negative impact of being taught shame and how, even as an adult in her own home, she still cannot shake off that feeling. Her expectation that this personal sense of shame dissipates as one becomes older, has also been expressed in age studies, but it has similarly complex

implications. It is a mindset that is attested in some empirical research. Nick Hubble and Philip Tew explored older adult readers' reflections on their own age and the way older adulthood is presented in literature. They quote extensively from the diary of N1592, an unnamed 75-year-old woman, who reflects on her age:

> When I am old I shall wear purple—as Jenny Joseph famously enunciated—I no longer care what people think of my appearance, actions, what I say. I'm no longer afraid to address a meeting, sing a solo, recite, crack a joke in a dismal silence—my privilege. (91)

This feeling overlaps with Marie's (46) expectation that the ageing process induces a sense of "screw it I'm doing my own thing." Indeed, N1592 describes this as a firmly positive quality of aging. However, she contextualizes it as a direct consequence of a different, negative aspect of aging, the fact that she feels invisible as an older woman: "who cares! I'm invisible anyway" (92).

As I will explore later in this chapter, (in)visibility and the broader theme of shame return as topics throughout Astrid's (68) and Griet's (58) responses. However, before discussing the oldest readers, I briefly want to turn to Michiel (12), the youngest reader who engaged with Mina's extraordinary activities, and did not complete several of them. Shame and embarrassment were completely absent from his explanation, but there was significant overlap with Leen in the emphasis he placed on the impact of his reading-environment. Where Leen's reading time was constrained by her job, Michiel (12) found himself unable to do all the activities the way he wished because he used some of his spare time at school to read. For example, I asked him whether he completed the following extraordinary activities:

EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

Write a sentence which fills a whole page.

EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

Write a single word at the center of a page.

Michiel replied that he "didn't do that, no. I was in the study hall at that time and we had to work with a system of 20 minutes of studying followed by a five-minute break. And I thought: 'If I only have five minutes this activity is not that easy to complete.'"[244] In addition, this particular time and space also shaped *how* he executed some of the extraordinary activities. Mina proposes that the reader "Take a line for a walk. Find out what you're drawing when you've drawn it." Michiel completed this activity in the study

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[244] Original text: "Die heb ik niet gedaan, nee. Toen zat ik in de studie en dan was ik met het systeempje van 20 minuutjes leren, 5 minuutjes pauze nemen. En dan denk ik, 'als je 5 minuten hebt, gaat dat niet zo makkelijk.'"

hall, and remarked that he made his drawing "on the beat of the sound you hear around you and how bright the light is. Making waves, going straight, that sort of stuff."[245] In that regard, there is some overlap between Michiel's and Leen's dependency on their environment for completing these activities in a way that is tied to age.

Just as Leen (30) has adult responsibilities, Michiel (12) has to attend school. This overlap is interesting to acknowledge as a form of kinship (Gubar, "Hermeneutics"). Through framing Michiel and Leen in a context of kinship, I want to stress that—despite existing in evidently different stages of the life course—it is also important to acknowledge what they share (see also Joosen, *Adulthood* 83). For example, one key aspect of age to which Gubar applies this kinship model, is the notion of agency. She emphasizes that "[r]ather than assume that adults are full-fledged autonomous agents and then attempt to discern how children fail to live up to that standard" we should acknowledge "that all human beings begin life in a compromised position, a state of dependency in which key decisions about who we are and how we live our lives are being made for us" ("Hermeneutics" 300). With Leen and Michiel, the question of agency floats to the surface in how they engaged with Mina's activities. Both experience their own age in a broader context of responsibility and obligation, tied to the locations and social contexts in which they function. Their observations also demonstrate how reader-response research can reveal much more than only *how* readers experience a narrative. By zooming out and locating literary experience in a broader socio-cultural context, literature becomes a prism that reveals both our shared humanity, as well as our disparate individuality.

### 3.2.3 The need for fantasy

Indeed, there are also ways in which participants' responses were unique. Compared to my interviews with Marie and Leen, my conversation with Michiel about the stories he wrote in response to Mina's activities was quite long. Michiel admitted that his story was heavily inspired by the Percy Jackson books. It was set in a "school where it is normal to be magical. And then you have the one person that isn't magical—me, in this case—and he is very good at other stuff."[246] When we compare Michiel's story to those by other readers, a few things stand out. He was the only reader writing a third-person story about themselves that entailed a fully fictionalized narrative. By that I mean that every other reader chose to describe their current situation and corresponding thoughts in a more or less biographical manner. Leen (30) wrote about her sitting on the train and the peace it brings her, Marie (46) created: "an everyday story about the things I did that day,"[247] while Astrid (68) and

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[245] Original text: "Zo op de maat van geluid dat je om u heen hoort of zo en hoe fel en hoe licht dat dat is, dan golvend en recht, die dingen."
[246] Original text: "Het is een soort normale school waar dat het normaal is om magisch te zijn. En dan heb je zo de enige persoon die niet magisch is. Ik dan, in dat geval. En die is dan heel goed met andere dingen."
[247] Original text: "Het was eigenlijk meer een alledaags verhaal van wat ik die dag had gedaan."

Griet (58) both reflected on becoming old, with references to their children or grandchildren.

In my interview with Leen (30), she had shared her frustrations about feeling unable to go beyond this kind of autobiographical description in her story:

> I feel that when I was younger, my fantasy was much more unbound. It was much easier to tell and make up stories compared to now. Now I get stuck on mundane facts and I wouldn't have had that so much in the past. [...] Ten years ago I don't think my story would have been just half a page long.[248]

Leen was not the only adult reader who made comments about "losing" fantasy. Astrid (68), the oldest participant, reflected on the amount of mental labour that completing the activities required of her, contrasting herself with fictional Mina:

> there are activities I'd like to have a second go at. I'd really have to sit down and focus. And really think. Meanwhile, [Mina] just writes what pops into her mind. Whatever pops into her mind, she writes down. Yeah, that's a part of the fantasy you lose as an adult.[249]

Leen and Astrid's comments continue the trend I explored in the previous chapter of this thesis regarding adult readers' complex feelings about their loss of imagination and fantasy as part of adulthood. While I will mainly reflect on these comments for the purposes and within the confines of this chapter on Mina's extraordinary activities, I also want to briefly remark on them through the lens of my prior chapter on imagination and fantasy. In the interviews about *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen*, readers mostly discussed fantasy and imagination as strictly cognitive functions, i.e. qualities of our way of thinking which lead us to enjoy stories that feature unreal or strange scenarios. Through readers' engagement with *My Name Is Mina's* extraordinary activities, fantasy and imagination gained a practical dimension, as a prerequisite needed for one to be able to easily write fiction in the first place. The idea of "unreality" takes a backseat in Leen and Astrid's comments, with it being barely present in Leen's reflection and fully absent in Astrid's. Leen laments her struggle with not getting "stuck on mundane facts", adding that she feels like her fantasy has been restrained by adulthood. Meanwhile, Astrid comments on needing much more focus to do what comes easily to Mina. In that context, the contrast between Michiel's (12) fully fictionalized reimagining of the Percy Jackson books featuring himself, and the mostly

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[248] Original text: "Ik heb het gevoel dat toen dat ik jonger was, dat mijn fantasie veel vrijer de loop ging, dat het veel makkelijker was om verhalen te vertellen of te verzinnen dan nu, nu blijf ik gelijk wat vasthangen op gewoon droge feiten en vroeger zou ik dat denk ik minder gehad hebben, vroeger denk ik, [...] toch tien jaar geleden dat mijn verhaal niet maar een half paginaatje zou geweest zijn."

[249] Original text: "Er zijn opdrachten die ik terug wil oppakken — ik zou me moeten echt gaan zetten en concentreren. En echt zoeken. Maar zij schrijft gewoon wat in haar hoofd komt. Wat in haar hoofd opkomt, dat schrijft zij allemaal op. Ja, een deel fantasie die ge kwijt zijt als volwassene."

autobiographical stories of the older readers becomes particularly striking. In a way, this difference illustrates adult readers' struggle to break free from what Tolkien referred to as "the domination of observed 'fact'" (60).

While I want to avoid unnecessary repetition of the fantasy and imagination section, I do want to acknowledge that it is compelling that across two significantly different approaches to gathering reader-response data, adult readers consistently construct adulthood as a time of lost fantasy and imagination, and childhood as one of spontaneous, effortless imagination and fantasy. When Leen and Astrid struggled with Mina's activities, they blamed this on a lost connection to childhood fantasy, which they characterized as a consequence of adulthood, rather than thinking that they might have just had a bad day. In this case, both believed that instead of some biological process, this change is a product of how society constrains adults. When I asked whether she believed that her ability to use fantasy was lost for good, Leen replied: "it would come back if I were to invest in it. I think it would just be a problem of time. […] As adults we all have lots of responsibilities and I imagine it would be very difficult at first to not have those take over."[250] Astrid made roughly the same point, suggesting that she had lost fantasy in adulthood "because you are just busy doing so many things. I've been retired for barely two years and finally have more time for that sort of stuff."[251]

### 3.2.4 Older readers and their third-person stories

At the end of each interview, I asked participants whether they would be comfortable with sending me a scan of the extraordinary activities that required them to produce written texts or drawn images. Interestingly, the only readers who wanted to do so were the oldest two participants, Griet (58) and Astrid (68). In contrast, Michiel (12), Leen (30) and Marie (46) all felt that their creations were personal and did not wish to share the originals, although they did describe them to me. In this final section, I will turn my attention to the written stories produced by the oldest readers, and explore how some of the themes and topics I discussed earlier returned here.

Griet (58) and Astrid (68) independently chose to emphasize age in their stories, jumping at the opportunity to address their concerns and uncertainties, and did not mind sharing them with a researcher who openly disclosed the possibility that their stories would be disseminated in research-publications. This is interesting in the context of shame that emerged in my interviews with Leen (30) and Marie (46) and the quote from Hubble and Tew's participant N1592, who remarked that her sense of shame dissipated over time

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[250] Original text: "Ik geloof wel dat dat terug zou komen als ik daar de investering in zou doen. Ik denk dat het gewoon een probleem van tijd zou zijn om dat te doen […] allee als volwassen mensen hebben we allemaal veel verantwoordelijkheden en ik vermoed dat het zeker in het begin zeer lastig zou zijn om die dan niet te laten overnemen als ik dat zou doen."

[251] Original text: "Omdat je met veel andere dingen in het leven bezig bent, voor een groot stuk. Ik ben nu nog maar twee jaar gepensioneerd en er komt meer tijd voor dat soort dingen."

because she feels invisible as an older woman (92). My oldest participants were the only readers who felt comfortable sharing their creative products and both opted to make age visible in their stories. Of course, all participants were told in advance that my research project centred on age, so the choice of age as a topic for Griet and Astrid's stories was perhaps somewhat prompted. However, none of the younger readers' stories addressed age as a topic to the same extent.

In addition, it is relevant to consider that Mina's two prompts for these extraordinary activities are placed right after her own third-person story about herself exploring an underground coal mine. Aspects from Mina's own story seem to return in some participants' stories.[252] Mina relays how she ran out of school after being bullied and ended up in the old coal mine below the park. There, she encountered someone patrolling the mines, which scared her, and she ran back out. Mina starts her story by describing herself: "She was just nine years old. She was very skinny and very small and she had jet-black hair and a pale pale face and shining eyes. Some folks said she was weird. Her mum said she was brave." During her underground adventure, she also muses about Greek mythology, such as the minotaur and Orpheus.

Mina's reverence for Greek mythology may have inspired Michiel's narrative about a school "where you learn how to fight mythological characters and stuff."[253] In contrast, Griet (58) and Astrid (68) seem to build more on the parts where Mina reflects on her own identity and fears. Astrid opted for writing about herself in the third person. Her story was relatively short, so I include it in full below:

> She is 68, alone, happy in a nice house with a garden, birds, chickens, frogs and salamanders. Time is slowly running out. Many memories but also what is still possible? What with the coming generations, and then concretely what will her grandchildren have to deal with?[254]

Astrid (68), like Mina, opens by stating her age, but where Mina shifts focus to other matters, age and time remain the core topics of Astrid's story. Her comment about being alone is instantly followed by the reassurance that she is happy. The up-beat first sentence is balanced with a set of questions and remarks about the inevitability of death, uncertainty about how much more she can accomplish and concern about the coming

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[252] For context, Mina chooses to write hers down to be able to relay it to her mother, though she is unable to put into words why precisely the story needed to be in the third person: "I thought I'd write the story of the Underworld in the first person, [but] somehow it's better to write this in the third person." Mina's story covers several different topics and is significantly longer than the ones the participants wrote, at a total of just over 2500 words.

[253] Original text: "waar dat je zo leert te vechten tegen allemaal mythologische figuren en zo."

[254] Original text: "Ze is 68, alleen, gelukkig in een fijn "woon" huis met tuin, vogels, kippen, kikkers en salamanders. De tijd raakt stilaan op. Veel herinneringen maar ook wat kan nog? Wat met volgende generaties, en dan konkreet ~~wat zullen~~ haar kleinkinderen waarmee moeten afrekenen?"

generations. Rachel Siegel remarks that "[f]ailing strength, isolation, and the fear of death, all of which are associated with aging, though formidable, do not inevitably cause depression" (qtd. in Gullette 53). Astrid's third person story is that of a woman who—although she worries—finds happiness and comfort in old age.

Meanwhile, Griet (58) was the only reader who opted to write both a full story about herself in the third-person *and* a story about someone else in the first-person. Due to the length of her stories, I have selected specific segments to discuss here, while the full stories are included in appendix 10. Griet's stories cover various topics, ranging from her struggles with living up to her own expectations of adulthood, to the pain older people experience in a society that sometimes refuses to acknowledge the fact that people age. While writing about herself, Griet first reflects on a childhood that is marked by a sense of certainty, which partially disappears when she grows older:

> She grew up.
>
> She became an adult.
>
> She heard about awful things in the news.
>
> She knew that she couldn't be a coward, nor did she want to be.
>
> She didn't always know how.
>
> Deep in her heart she knows that she still isn't fully adult. She has kids of her own now. She thinks that she will be very brave if they are ever in danger. She still doesn't know how brave she will be in actual danger, because she doesn't have a dangerous life.[255]

Griet's story seems to express a disconnect between her own conceptualization of adulthood and how she actually feels, centred on the idea of bravery. Although her story touches upon some of the anxieties Griet has about what being an adult means, the tale ends on a mostly content reflection about how her small acts of bravery are enough for now.

Like Michiel and Astrid, Griet seems inspired by aspects from Mina's story. Bravery matters to Mina as well, as she repeatedly whispers the mantra "*My name is Mina. I am very*

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[255] Original text:
"Ze groeide op.
Ze werd volwassen.
Ze hoorde over enge zaken in het nieuws.
Ze wist dat ze geen lafaard mocht zijn, wilde zijn.
Ze wist niet altijd hoe
Diep in haar hart weet ze dat ze nog altijd niet helemaal volwassen is. Ze heeft nu zelf kinderen. Ze denkt dat ze heel dapper zal zijn als die in gevaar zouden zijn. Ze weet nog altijd niet hoe dapper ze zal zijn in echt gevaar, want ze heeft geen gevaarlijk leven."

*brave*" (italics in the original) throughout her trip in the coalmine. Like Mina, Griet tells her story through flashbacks, but whereas Mina's only encompass a brief period in her past, Griet reflects on her whole life. Interestingly, while in Mina's story her belief in her own bravery pushes her beyond her initial limits (e.g. "she told herself she'd dare to go through that entrance," 40), Griet's story is more about accepting that she will never be as brave as she would like to be, and contextualizing that in her personal view on adulthood. In other words, Mina tells a story of pride in personal growth and further potential achievement, whereas Griet is more centred on being content with what you have and are.

### 3.2.5 A note on beings and becomings

The tension between growth and stasis that emerges through this comparison between Mina and Griet's story is one that operates in the background of several analyses across this entire thesis. I have previously alluded to the "beings" vs. "becomings" debate in childhood studies and age studies to explore readers' position vis-à-vis didacticism, fantasy and imagination. To briefly recap that discussion: children and adults are often constructed as "in progress" and "finished", respectively. In response to these prominent cultural narratives, scholars from a range of disciplines have remarked on both children's right to be respected as someone who exists right now, and not just an unfinished adult, while (older) adults should be permitted to change, and not be burdened with finality (Uprichard 305; Fitzpatrick 44; Heywood Epub). In Griet and Astrid's third-person stories, we can once again detect a struggle between hope for "becoming," and acceptance of "being." Astrid recognizes that she has limited time left but still contemplates personal goals, constructing old age as a time where change may still be possible. Griet's story emphasizes her own happiness despite recognizing that progress is more difficult because of her age, but also leaves the possibility that she may become brave if her children are ever in danger. In contrast, Michiel's story fundamentally revolves around change and positive growth, being a school story where the main character learns various new skills.

When we zoom out, these tensions do not only emerge within readers' produced responses to the activities, but are also present in their reflections on what engaging with these activities was like in the first place. Certainly, Leen, Marie and Astrid's views on the "finished" status of adulthood is complicated. Marie (46) expressed regret at being conditioned into self-consciousness which now prohibits her from effortlessly engaging with the activities, while Leen (30) and Astrid (68) similarly reflected on how they lost much of their imagination or fantasy due to being told to act like adults. The cultural narrative of the "finished" adult in part relies on this finished product being better and more complete than childhood. It creates a belief that adults should be "competent at everything" (Uprichard 305). Thus, the way these readers reflected from a position of mild regret or even sadness, at the very least questions the superiority of the "finished" adult product. Furthermore, with regard to fantasy, Leen and Astrid both believe that this quality can be reclaimed in adulthood with enough time and effort. In that sense, they uphold a

narrative of potential for continued adult "becoming" and change. At the same time, however, this also recognizes adulthood as a state of partial atrophy.

## 3.2.6 Griet's first-person story

For her first-person story about someone else, Griet wrote from the perspective of Pierre Brice, the actor who played Winnetou in the 1960s West-German films. Griet composed a short story detailing Brice's reflections about growing old and his struggles with continuing to perform as Winnetou for various events:

> I feel it in my back. I have to hold the table to be able to stand up without too much pain. There isn't much glamour in getting old. […] It's just that the real Winnetou never got old. Well, the real fictional Winnetou. I do it for the kids. Just a bit longer on the exercise bike so that I can climb the stairs to the stage without help.[256]

In contrast to her story about herself, her story about Brice puts more emphasis on negative aspects of ageing. It is presented as the private reflection of an older man whose ageing body aches, but who feels pressured by his environment to keep performing a role he is no longer able to enact without significant physical discomfort. While Astrid's narrative relayed the potential for happiness despite social isolation and the distinct awareness of death, Griet's story portrays an older person who is deeply miserable despite being surrounded by people and being literally put on a pedestal (or stage). The term "performance" is significant here. As Laz writes: "Age *is* an act, a performance in the sense of something requiring activity and labor" (86, emphasis in original). Griet's Pierre is literally putting up a youthful performance that is so discordant with the reality of his body that he needs to work and suffer for it. There is also an undertone of guilt, shame and exploitation. Pierre does not want to disappoint the young fans and knows that his performance raises money. That is not to say that all performances of age are necessarily motivated by shame or guilt; Woodward has explored several empowering examples ("Performing" 287-288). But whereas Woodward writes about people who perform old adulthood for their own benefit, Pierre's performance is presented as a kind of charity and he becomes subject to other people's purposes. He is paraded as an attraction to raise money and entertain others.

Moreover, while thinking about age as a performance is mostly metaphorical, here it literally involves an older man dressing up as a character he played in his early thirties and consequently attempting to re-embody a younger self that is inconsistent with his changed body. In her book *Age Studies*, Pickard includes a section where she explores our response

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[256] Original text: "Ik voel het in mijn rug. Ik moet me aan de tafel vasthouden om zonder al te veel pijn recht te komen. Er is niet veel glans aan ouder worden. […] Alleen is de echte Winnetou nooit oud geworden. Nu ja, de echte fictieve Winnetou. Ik doe het voor de kinderen. Nog even op de hometrainer, dat ik het trapje van het podium zonder hulp op kan."

to "the model Heidi Klum attending a Hallowe'en party in fancy dress as a 'wrinkled old lady'" (194):

> Just like the Rabelaisian carnival celebration of the grotesque, the poor and the ugly, Klum can only indulge in her spectacle of age because in the world of Order she is known for a youthful beauty that has earned her a fortune. The performance draws attention to the disjunction between the 'real' Heidi and this Hag; it does not so much suggest the arbitrary quality of the rules of age and beauty as remind us why they are (rightly) there. (195)

Klum's performance as an old woman serves as an interesting opposite to Pierre. In Griet's story we are faced with an older man whose performance of youth is motivated not by the audience's knowledge that he is much older, but by their refusal to let him age: "the real Winnetou never got old," so Pierre cannot be old either. He is told that the fundraiser will be most successful if "the 'real Winnetou' hits the stage." His own age thus needs to become invisible for the audience to be amused.

Griet (58) and Astrid (68) both make use of Mina's fairly general prompts to foreground some of the upsides and downsides of ageing. In their stories, they incorporate significant nuance, and to some extent genuine tenderness at what being older may mean for different people. Being alone in old age does not equal unhappiness, and being uncertain about whether or not you are successful at "being" a brave adult does not prohibit you from being brave "enough for now." Moreover, unlike the younger participants, Griet (58) and Astrid (68) voluntarily shared their entire written stories without mentioning embarrassment. The stories highlight both the joys and challenges that accompany ageing. In doing so, they offer an open, insightful look into their age group– an intriguing contrast with the more explicit shame highlighted by some younger readers.

### 3.2.7 Book -> Reader: Concluding thoughts

The impetus for this section of my research was a desire to shift my focus more to a bottom-up starting point to reflect on readers' responses, i.e. the meaning-making that takes place in response to specific textual information (Schneider, "Reception" 120). For that purpose, *My Name Is Mina's* extraordinary activities represented a unique opportunity in the form of specific built-in prompts that not only ask readers to engage actively with the narrative, but do so intradiegetically. Thus, although readers were prompted by me to actually complete the activities, their engagement with them is arguably closer to the initial literary encounter than the activities and questions I designed and introduced post-facto to elicit responses in the other interview cycles. Also, starting from these prompts permitted me to offer more specific and focused comparisons between readers' responses in contrast to the more general interviews that I conducted for *Iep!* and *Voor altijd samen, amen*. However, readers' responses also quickly revealed

the depth and inevitability of "the interaction of bottom-up and top-down processing" (Schneider, "Construction" 608).

As I have shown, all five readers responded to Mina's extraordinary activities in ways that foregrounded aspects of their ages. While the actual content of their completed activities is of course a key source of data, the entanglement with age already presented itself on a higher level, in *how* readers chose to engage with these activities, ranging from those they opted to skip, to how their reading environment folded back into the completed activity. For instance, in Michiel's (12) and Leen's (30) cases, the places where they read the book and completed activities were tied to their age. Age scholars have remarked how "we are increasingly segregated by our structures and institutions on the basis of age" (Titterington et al. 121), and as a working adult and a school-going child, both of the youngest readers found themselves reading the book in environments tied to the institutions they are entangled in. In turn, these environments constrained and shaped their responses to the extraordinary activities, ranging from the sounds these environments provided to the pressure of social conformity that readers struggled to supersede. As part of that social dynamic, "shame" played a complex role in readers' handling of the activities. In general, the engagement with the activities emphasized all the more how the experience of literature is an unavoidably social process that is intertwined with readers' environments. Even when we ignore this social context and only look at the concrete responses to the activities, Griet and Astrid's stories still demonstrate a need to reflect on age and its social nuances.

Aside from the results I have discussed above, this approach also offers an interesting methodological counterpoint to the more traditional semi-structured interviews that I have also used to gather data for this thesis. Reader-response research traditionally asks "how it is that literary works have the meaning they do for readers" (Culler 52). Hybrid books like *My Name Is Mina* allow us to take that question one step further by asking how readers *make* meaning in wholly new ways in response to a literary work. While some of the products of readers' engagement with Mina's extraordinary activities shift away from direct relevance to the book, there is distinct value in that as well. Benton suggests that "reader-response methods can help to illuminate the values and attitudes that readers sometimes hide, even from themselves" (Benton 96). In doing research with readers' creative responses to a literary work, we are given the opportunity to delve into what that book "did" to the reader in ways that their more direct responses might not otherwise facilitate. Evelyn Arizpe et al. point out that some readers may "struggle to express themselves through words," and that by granting them access to a "form of expression that sidesteps language barriers," we enable readers from diverse backgrounds to engage with literature in ways that empower them to express their responses in forms that they may be more literate in (306). In the planning stages of my research, I had some concerns about the unpredictable aspect of the extraordinary activities. In practice, however, my fear at the data's diversity eventually turned into excitement, as readers' engagement with

the extraordinary activities offered such multi-faceted insight into their views on age and identity that it made it worth taking the risk.

Readers' completion of *My Name Is Mina's* extraordinary activities offered a unique perspective on the entanglement of age, spatiality, shame and the experience of literature. In Tandoi's discussion of her empirical research on *My Name Is Mina,* she notes how her young participants read the story out loud in "performances that […] often disregarded […] linguistic meaning, but the children derived great pleasure from experimenting with the physical challenge of articulating words and creating a multi-sensory reading experience" ("Negotiating" 81). Similarly, the participants I interviewed engaged with the extraordinary activities in ways that sometimes disregarded direct connections to the book, but simultaneously created a multi-sensory experience; both in the literal meaning of the sounds and sights that were incorporated into the completed activities, but also through more figurative senses, such as a sense of shame, space, time and age.

In writing this concluding section for my work on *My Name Is Mina's* extraordinary activities, I was reminded of the adage that all roads lead to Rome, i.e. different paths can take one to the same goal or conclusion. Ultimately, there is more that connects this section: "book→reader", and the first section: "reader→book", than that sets them apart. Though I started from a different vantage point for this section, I inadvertently again demonstrated that top-down and bottom-up meaning-making cannot be cleanly separated. In the previous section, I started from readers' abstract reflections on age and used those as a lens to explore various aspects of the book. Here I started from precise concrete textual passages and looked towards the reader. Yet in both cases I ended up discussing the interplay between both aspects. The next section: "reader→ world", takes the unavoidability of this interplay and entanglement to its logical conclusion by adopting it as its core focus.

## 3.3 Reader <--> World: A Children's Literature Research-assemblage

Throughout this thesis, I started from various vantage points for my analyses, only to find myself having to shift some part of the focus of my writing to broader complicated networks of interaction between readers, the book and the broader world anyway because those three aspects are fundamentally intertwined. This final analysis therefore opts to take that entanglement as its fundamental object of study in a number of different ways. The analysis itself is a reworked version of a chapter I wrote for the edited volume *Children's Culture Studies After Childhood*.

For the analysis in this section to make the most sense, I will first briefly introduce its broader context and highlight the particular circumstances which brought it into being. Specifically, I want to explore the framework of "new materialism" and "after childhood research" that the edited volume for which this text was initially written situated itself in. As such, I admit that it is unlikely that I would have autonomously opted to work with this particular theoretical framework if it was not for my interest in contributing to *Children's Culture Studies After Childhood.* That being said, while I recognize the artificiality of the starting point of this analysis, I was granted the opportunity to write this text in late 2020: a time in my research process in which I was struggling with several complex questions regarding my positionality in terms of participant recruitment, the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work I was doing, and what shifting to digital interview methods meant for my research. The new materialist framework that I was introduced to in the process of writing a chapter for the edited volume coincidentally provided me with the vocabulary needed to reflect on these questions in a productive and insightful way. Thus, although the initial catalyst for this section was a need to make my pre-existing research fit within a call for papers, that process made me reflect on the role of power and broader material entanglements in my research in a way that now – at the end of my thesis – ties well into some of the tensions that I have observed in my other analyses, as I will attempt to outline below.

New materialism is an "an interdisciplinary, theoretical, and politically committed field of inquiry", focused on "a renewed substantial engagement with the dynamics of materialization" (Yi Sencindiver). New materialist analyses generally shift away from "post-structuralist concerns with textuality and social construction […] to assert a central role for matter" (Alldred and Fox 224), and in doing so "cuts across a conventional mind/matter dualism" (Fox and Alldred, *Sociology* 26). Simply put, new materialism views the world as an entangled web of human and non-human actors that have the potential to affect one another on equal footing. It is not necessarily concerned with how humans give meaning to their environment, rather than with how the environment and the human constitute, create and change one another. In this paradigm, "humans are no longer the only agentic

subject" (Malone 198), but just one of the many actors in complicated webs of relationality. Sonja Arndt, while being interviewed by Claudia Diaz-Diaz and Paulina Semenec, offered the example of children playing with toys in moist sand:

> the sand too is agentic, as is the moisture that might be in the sand, affecting the sand, the children's skin, the digger that they're driving in the moist sand, and so on. Over time, left in the moist sand, the digger might rust, the parts might stop moving smoothly and the children's play and relationship to the sand and to the digger might change. The digger too experiences sand, moisture, time. The moist sand becomes part of the child, as a vital, agentic material. (Arndt et al. 7-8)

New materialist analyses involve all sorts of matter, ranging from concrete examples such as sand, to more abstract ones. Scholars mention "contemporary technologies, sciences, and ecologies" (García-González and Deszcz-Tryhubczak 46), "bodies, objects, organs, species" (Fox and Alldred, *Sociology* 24), "dirt, dust, radiation" (Malone 194) just to name a few examples.

New materialism is often discussed as an example of posthumanist research, in that it "does not presume that man is the measure of all things" (Barad 136). Posthumanist approaches, like new materialism, ask us to "decenter ourselves" and "pay more attention to the wider worldly relationships that we're all enmeshed in and with" (Arndt et al. 6). A more specific form of this is the "after childhood" research promoted by the edited volume for which I initially wrote this text. Among its many features, doing research "after childhood" implores us "to remain absolutely concerned with children but to let them slip from view – to move out of focus" (Kraftl 7). In doing so, after childhood aims to expand the scope of our analyses to factors that would have been neglected as mere "context" in prior paradigms (Malone 187). One way of doing this in terms of children and childhood is by locating childhood in studies with other foci – such as climate change or urban development – that also affect children but do not put them central. Alternatively, Karen Malone's work has demonstrated the value of this decentering process by studying children's interactions with various "nonhuman entities" (202), such as grubs and insects, in the natural world. Her research is not limited to how children interpret their natural environment, but focuses on "how child and matter (worms, grubs, and bugs) coexist and produce each other" (200). Through decentering the child, "after childhood" adopts a relational way of thinking and writing about children. A wide range of material factors are considered in terms of how they relate to childhood – how they are all ultimately entangled in what "childhood" *is.*

I was introduced to this broader framework after I had already completed my interviews and group discussions for *Iep!*. At the time, I was struggling with finding the most appropriate and insightful way to describe the complex dynamics that existed beyond the strict boundaries of the interview-data itself, which nevertheless still shaped that data. How, for instance, do I account for the fact that young readers always participated with

their parents present in some capacity, sometimes even receiving whispered answers from off-screen? Or how do I include the significant observations I made about the ways in which digital interviewing tools such as Blackboard Collaborate introduced a whole realm of nuanced social implications that entangled readers' ages with their material possessions (e.g. a microphone and internet connection)?

Although my research was not designed from a new materialist epistemology, I ended up taking inspiration from Malone, who executed a new materialist "retrospective rereading of data" (186). Likewise, I was drawn to new materialism's "newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers" (Bennett 13) as a way to rethink and reframe the dynamics I outlined above. Consequently, I developed this chapter as a new materialist rereading of my reader-response data, in which I discuss the interactions between some of the nuanced factors I outlined above as manifestations of power dynamics between human and non-human actors. In the end, my contribution to *Children's Culture Studies After Childhood* expanded the notion of "after childhood" research into a slightly broader lens that did not just let children "slip from view" (Kraftl 7), but that decentred my participants in general. Through this lens, I was able to – for instance – discuss COVID-19 as an agentic entity that has the power to shape the reading experience as part of a broad net of relations. In a nutshell, this section explores research question 4: "How do power, age and matter become enmeshed in readers' participation in a reader-response project on children's literature?"

Using this new materialist lens, this final section of my thesis takes entanglement and complex relationships as its primary topic of study. That being said, the power dynamics that I outline in this section have been present throughout this thesis, but were not thematized as I instead opted to first take the reader and the book as vantage points for my analyses. Here, that dynamic flips, in a sense, as I put the reader and the book into a broader conversation on age, literature and research in general. After a brief exploration of power in the context of new materialist and children's literature criticism, I will begin by discussing how the COVID-19 pandemic interacted materially with participants' involvement in the research, indicating how – prior to their responses to the book – readers' participation already involved the production and negotiation of power through intergenerational entanglement. I then shift to discussing interactions with the book, outlining how two participants of different ages offer a relational contrast in their reading of two characters and their intergenerational entanglement. Throughout this analysis, the intent is to explore some of the different ways in which power, in the broadest sense, involves and draws together readers, researchers, age, children's literature, and the broader material circumstances in which the interviews were conducted.

### 3.3.1 Power, assemblages and new materialism

A discussion about power requires acknowledging that it is a topic with academic "baggage." John Law refers to it as "one of the most contentious and slippery concepts in

sociology" (165). For my purposes, I look at power as "the capacity to produce or prevent change" (Leslie Green; Berndtson 73). This is a rather open-ended definition that sees power as the ability to make things happen – to cause a shift from one state to another. In my interview data, power emerged as an intergenerationally entangled product of participants' relationality with each other, with me as researcher, but also with various other new materialist actants in and outside of the book.

Within new materialist analyses, scholars make sense of such complex webs of relations by studying them as "assemblages" (Bennett 5; García-González and Deszcz-Tryhubczak 54). An assemblage is an organizing tool that describes the "relational network" (Fox and Alldred, "Research-assemblage" 399) of human and non-human elements represented by an event, object, phenomenon, or any other situation in which the "animate and inanimate" affect each other and are affected ("Research-assemblage" 399). While there are a number of different conceptualisations of the assemblage, my discussion is rooted mainly in Alldred and Fox's approach, which has been used in more operative applications in sociology research. Consider, for example, one of the assemblages Alldred and Fox describe in the context of sexualities-education, based on qualitative interviews with teachers:

> Teacher – school students – parents – information – minds – bodies – curriculum – workload – colleagues – 'achievement agenda' – classroom – tabloid newspapers – public outrage – resources – models of education and development – teachers' attitudes and sexualities (231)

Jane Bennett describes an assemblage as formed by "actants" in which each actant: "has efficacy, can do things, […] produce effects, alter the course of events" (Bennett viii). In the above assemblage, the classroom is just as much an actant as the teacher. Human beings remain part of the assemblage, without being a *privileged* part (Fox and Alldred, *Sociology* 24). Thus, where in the past, non-human matter was "generally assumed to be a fixed substance, brute, inert, and passive—objects, things to be used by agentive humans" (St. Pierre et al. 99), new materialism draws the human *and* the non-human into assemblage on equal footing.

Assemblages "work" explicitly in terms of power and relationality (Bennett 21) with actants wielding power over other actants in the assemblage. Fox and Alldred talk about "affect"[257] in this context: "[a]n affect represents a change of state or capacities of an entity […] – a change that might be physical, psychological, emotional or social" (Fox and Alldred, *Sociology* 24). For the purposes of this chapter, affects are a useful tool to outline power relations. In fact, within an assemblage, actants and their affects create and maintain an "affect economy", a complex web of affects that is in constant flux, as "being affected" influences an actant's own ability to affect (Fox and Alldred, *Sociology* 24). Thinking about

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[257] A term borrowed from Spinoza.

power as relational is not unique to new materialist thought; scholars such as John Law wrote thirty years ago that power is a relational product: "to store power, or to have discretion in its development, is to enjoy (or suffer from) the effects of a stable network of relations" (166). What sets new materialism apart is the inclusivity of these relations and the explicit recognition of relational power dynamics as extending to the research process itself, as the phenomena under scrutiny are produced through the entanglement of actants and their affects. When we conduct social inquiries, this relationality extends to the researcher as well. In fact, our research is produced in a "research-assemblage," which "comprises the bodies, things and abstractions that get caught up in social inquiry, including the events that are studied, the tools, models and precepts of research, and the researchers" (Fox and Alldred, "Research-assemblage" 400). Karen Barad stresses the importance of acknowledging what is included and excluded within a research-assemblage's entanglement, as "different intra-actions produce different phenomena" (58). Power within a research assemblage thus still remains "the capacity to produce or prevent change" (Leslie Green; Berndtson 73), but with three distinct additions. First, it is extended to non-human elements. Second, it is broadened so that "change" can also refer to psychological, emotional and social change. So, while a human pushing another human is an example of power, so is a movie making its viewers cry. Third, power is emphasised as explicitly relational: something is only powerful through its exertion of that power (also referred to as affect) on something else.

Consequently, this has some implications for questions of agency. Agency is traditionally invoked as a higher, more abstract force from which more specific instances of power dynamics are derived. Leslie Green argues that the capacity for agency is what allows something to exercise power in the first place, while John Law, for example, defines an agent (i.e., someone who has agency) as "a structured set of relations with a series of (power) effects" (173). Bennett remarks that: "[a] lot happens to the concept of agency once nonhuman things are figured less as social constructions and more as actors" (21). If we shift towards adopting the type of research-assemblage discussed by Fox and Alldred, agency does not disappear but is instead distributed and shared by human, more-than-human and non-human actants. This shift away from individual agency is lauded by scholars such as Spyros Spyrou, who, in *Reimagining Childhood Studies,* argues that childhood scholars:

> valoriz[e] children's agency to the point of a fetish, making of it [an] analytic bulwark against the encroachment [...] of anything that feels like psychological, biological or, indeed, structural ways of knowing. [...] [A]gency itself – in its centrality, dominance and hegemonic position in childhood studies – may very well stand in the way of reaching for alternative ways of knowing. (Spyrou 3-4)

Thus, Spyrou's point is not that agency should be wholly discarded from childhood studies, but that agency – not unlike power – is also relational and that ascribing it to individuals

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only limits our analyses. Consequently, Spyrou suggests (by quoting Clémentine Beauvais) that there is significant value in thinking and writing about children and childhood "without agency ready at hand" (Beauvais qtd. in Spyrou 4). Drawing from these insights, I opt to not emphasize agency and keep my discussion closer to more concrete worldly entanglements and their implications regarding the power dynamics they represent. Ultimately, as Spyrou concludes: "the complexity and dynamism of life itself necessitates making a 'cut' around the object of study, and demands of us decisions as to the theoretical and conceptual resources we mobilize" (6). I "make my cut" around power dynamics and attempt to catch and convey some of its complexity in my discussion of this research data.

Considering readers' encounters with children's literature as actants interacting within a research-assemblage is a potentially thought-provoking way of re-thinking connections between books, readers and the material world. In my analysis, I look at how power in the research-assemblage is intertwined with both the participants' ages and the age of the characters (which are also actants). In doing so I aim to emphasize the relationality of age-power dynamics. The goal is thus to critically evaluate my research assemblage and its actants and discuss how age and power are properties that do not just belong to one age group but are at least in part products of the assemblage's relationality. The participants, myself and the book are three key actants that have "the capacity to produce or prevent change" (Leslie Green), yet these are interwoven with an array of other minor or major actants that "make a difference" (Bennett viii).

### 3.3.2 Age and power in children's literature

Within children's literature criticism, power's relation to age has also been a topic of continuing discussion. There certainly is a history of scholars stressing adult power; within the last decade some still posited that the field of children's literature studies as a whole "argues that the child is always at the mercy of adult power" (Rampaul 154; see also Nodelman 124; Nikolajeva 20;43). There has however, been a move towards investigating and affirming how child readers and characters can be said to also have power, sometimes independently and sometimes more in relation to adults. Nikolajeva, for example, identified a number of stories for children that portray fictional children as powerful, but uses carnival theory to point out that such instances of empowerment are temporary and serve to reaffirm the status quo and adult power (*Power* 20;43). Beauvais argued that power dynamics in children's literature "are of a sophistication which precludes any easy attribution of 'empowerment' or 'disempowerment' to one or the other party" (*Time* 3). Beauvais responds in part to conceptions of predominantly adult power and instead explores how (fictional) children also have a particular kind of power, grounded in their future – as of yet unrealized – potential. She argues that "the hidden adult is always subjected to a specific form of power belonging to the child. That form of power is might, and its currency is time" (*Time* 19). This same nuanced approach is also present in Gubar's

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"kinship model", in which she constructs age as a "messy continuum" in which children and adults can both be said to have agency, although the aging process simultaneously limits and engenders the sort of agency that they have ("Hermeneutics" 300).

David Rudd has described children's literature as a site where power, childhood and adulthood are constantly re-negotiated. He argues that: "while children can be construed as the powerless objects of adult discourse, they also have subject positions available to them that resist such a move" ("Possibility" 31). This process extends beyond the narratives themselves and into the realm of actual readers. As an example he points to the response to *History of the Fairchild Family*, a nineteenth-century work which Rudd describes as "heavily didactic" ("Possibility" 37). Though the children in that story have been described as voiceless, readers have been shown to resist its didacticism, with Rudd citing readers "who were not coerced, and who did voice their views: 'I liked the book notwithstanding. There was plenty about eating and drinking; one could always skip the prayers and there were three or four very brightly written accounts of funerals in it'" ("Possibility" 37).

Robin Bernstein's more recent article on intergenerational entanglement and power relations in the context of Going-to-Bed Books builds further on these approaches. Bernstein, like Beauvais and Gubar before her, rallies against "the top- down model of power in children's literature" ("Going-to-Bed" 879). She points out that the pleading nature of some of these stories (e.g. "Please, just this once, go to sleep" ("Going-to-Bed" 890)) reveal the powerlessness parents feel when their child refuses or is unable to fall asleep. Instead of belonging fully to adults, power emerges as an intergenerationally entangled product of the assemblage in which adult, child and book are drawn during bedtime reading. As Bernstein writes: "power swirls in multiple directions as adults and children—characters, readers, and performers—coconstruct [sic] both childhood and adulthood and repeatedly renegotiate these categories together" ("Going-to-Bed" 890). Thus, we are once again invited to think about age, power, readers, and children's literature not in terms of unilateral domination on the part of the adults, but as enmeshed actants having and being subjected to power in a collective assemblage. In that sense, the research assemblage's inherent focus on relationality makes it an especially appropriate lens through which we can look at power relations in the terms set out by Beauvais, Gubar and Bernstein. Its value, as Pam Nilan writes, precisely "lies in its flexibility; in the non-loading of power relation assumptions; in avoiding ascription of fixed structures of domination" (280).

### 3.3.3 My own research assemblage

In my analysis, I move from the general to the particular – starting with actants that are broader and operated mostly on the level of the research-assemblage itself (e.g. COVID-19). I then shift to more particular entanglements between participants and their environment, and finally delve into the interplay with the book and its characters. Since it

is not possible to offer an exhaustive or complete analysis of every meaningful interaction in the context of power across 25+ hours of interviews, I focus on those interactions between actants that I found to be particularly noticeable, powerful, or interesting. In doing so I recognize that my selection of interview data itself involves my own interaction as a researcher with the produced and recorded data, within the research-assemblage I set up. Doing research in a new materialist framework requires an awareness that the researcher is part of the assemblage and is inextricable from the produced results (Malone 186). There is no doubt that the various aspects of my research assemblage, be it my interview questions, way of speaking, analysis of the transcripts, and so on – shaped "the [created] knowledge according to the particular flows of affect produced by [my] methodology and methods" (Fox and Alldred, "Research-assemblage" 403). This shaping of knowledge is of course also in part born out of necessity. Vast quantities of human and non-human "things" affect and are affected by one another, with the result that aiming for a complete analysis is unfeasible. In my case, the interview transcripts for *Iep!* alone exceeded 150,000 words in length. Relaying this information in a comprehensible manner required me to impose "an analyst-defined aggregation upon the disparate data from an event" (Fox and Alldred, "Research-assemblage" 405). Given these circumstances, it is important that the researcher acknowledges that "one can't simply bracket (or ignore) certain issues without taking responsibility and being accountable for the constitutive effects of these exclusions" (Barad 58).

For this analysis, I chose data to present which to me appeared as especially interesting because it showcased moments where the complex relationality of my research assemblage led to poignant power/affect dynamics; i.e. moments where participants' entanglement with other actants resulted in "a change of state or capacities of an entity […] – a change that might be physical, psychological, emotional or social" (Fox and Alldred, *Sociology* 24). The affects I outline mostly fall into the latter three categories, though the point of my analysis is not to precisely define each affect but to explore how age and power interact and play off each other in those instances. Yet, my choosing to focus on the moments outlined below automatically excluded other elements that were actants in their own right and that constituted further expanding webs of interaction.

Within my research-assemblage, a number of elements can be identified as actants by the affective relations through which they influence one another. Readers themselves were actants who engaged with – and were engaged by – other actants in a variety of ways. Thus, the broad assemblage that emerged during my interviews contained, in no particular order, at least the following elements:

> School – age norms – health - family – software – gender – characters – experiences – relationships – rules – independence – books – bodies – minds – researchers – research design – questions – participants – living arrangements –

> money – education – cities – countryside – work – computers – research ethics –
> Covid 19

Not all of these return explicitly in my discussion below, but they all "mattered" in constituting the reality of my research. The unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic amplified economic and public health questions that ultimately informed my research and were entangled with the participants' responses. In addition, the age norms readers hold as true on a broader cultural level emerged entangled with real life and fictional living arrangements, interpersonal relationships, and questions about care and health.

### 3.3.4 Negotiations of age and power in the research-assemblage

The type of intergenerational interdependency identified by Bernstein also appears in my research-assemblage. Exploring this quality, however, requires acknowledging the broader context in which my interviews were conducted, that is amid Belgium's initial COVID-19 outbreak. I had begun planning the interview cycles in late 2019, just before the start of the pandemic. At that stage my intent was to invite participants to the university to conduct interviews in-person. I had considered that in-person interviews would be a hurdle for some. The youngest participants would require help from their parents to be able to come to the university, which would pose problems for those younger readers whose parents were busy or less interested in actively helping their child to participate. I assumed that some adults – especially those who enjoy flexible working hours – would find it comparatively easier to schedule a meeting with me at the university. One group I had not worried too much about were the older participants. As the intent was to find participants mostly in or near Antwerp, I figured that those in good health had the time to meet me at the university, while I was willing to visit those who struggled with travelling at their homes. However, when the pandemic hit, this entire dynamic was upheaved. Older people were most vulnerable to the virus, and keeping them safe required isolating them. Even if it had been permitted by local pandemic regulations, it was not safe for me to travel from participant to participant in case I was an asymptomatic carrier. Especially in the early days of the pandemic, when testing availability was very low. As I turned to digital interviewing tools, those who I had thought to be the easiest to reach were now suddenly in enforced social isolation, often without access to the internet and with it being unsafe for me to visit in person. As for my own role as an actant in this research assemblage, my choice to adapt to these circumstances by moving to online interviews dramatically shifted power-dynamics in the research assemblage, benefitting/empowering some, hamstringing/disempowering others, and requiring different forms of intergenerational interaction to take hold for the successful continuation of my interviews.

Consequently, the pandemic was an undeniably strong actant in the research-assemblage, with different implications for power for participants of different ages. Adult participants with jobs that shifted to work-from-home practices were mostly empowered by this

change to online interviews, as many had quickly gained experience with online meeting software. Others faced an extended, unexpected stay at home during lockdown with little to do, which enabled them to read more than usual and thus more easily take part in my research.

The pandemic also created opportunities for younger readers, such as Janne (14). Her schooling shifted to distance learning during the lockdown, granting her more responsibility, both in planning her own schooling, but also in organizing her participation in my research, as the more flexible schedule enabled her to participate at times that would traditionally have been spent at school. Additionally, after first deciding to participate in the focus group, she ultimately opted out when it was planned on a public holiday and she wanted to spend time with her friends, whom she could no longer see in school. Janne's correspondence with me also reflected a progressive shift into more independence. Every participant of the *Iep!* interviews younger than Janne could only be contacted through their mothers. Janne's participation similarly began with an email from her mother titled "Candidate Janne." Eventually, her mother CC'd Janne into the conversation; later, only Janne continued to respond – using her own email address – with her mother trusting her to make further arrangements. For our communication, she existed in a transitional space in terms of power and responsibility. This slide into independent communication was unique, with all younger participants' correspondence being filtered completely through their mothers, and all older participants except one contacting me directly. Within the complex "affect economy" of Janne's participation, intergenerational entanglement both enabled and limited Janne's power as an actant; her mother's explicit permission was required for Janne to be able to participate in the first place, but within her participation Janne found ways to have power, for instance, to cancel an appointment when she had other priorities. This specific power was contingent on the situation created by the pandemic.

While parental permission is an inherent part of ethical research with younger participants, their presence in the research-assemblage and their resulting affect is not always accounted for. Malone encourages the "foregrounding of those elements of the environments that often act as a 'context' or background to understandings of the child" (187). In thinking about younger participants' "environment", parental investment in the research was distinctly enmeshed with that of their children. This dynamic extended into how the interviews were conducted. Janne was the youngest participant to be interviewed without parental supervision, as every single younger participant was monitored by parents (and sometimes siblings). During some interviews, parents were just nearby. Agamemnon's (11) interview included his mother soothing his little brother, who had just learned he would not be in his favourite teacher's class next year, while Louise's (9) interview was marked by her parents preparing dinner in the background. Other parents were more directly involved: Floor's (11) mother sat just off-screen during the interview, with Floor's eyes regularly darting over to see her mother's responses to our discussion.

Ella (9) actively received input from her mother on the quality of her answers, at one point expanding her response after remarking: "my mother just told me that I should explain this better."[258]

Yet, the young participants did not adopt a totally deferential position either. Despite abundant parental supervision, some young readers remarked that they did not like reading and that they were forced to do it. They thus exposed and surreptitiously challenged adult power as well, actively acknowledging their literary "oppressor" and opting to not give the socially desirable answer of finding great enjoyment in reading. During the interview, 11-year-old Agamemnon reflected on his experience of reading, remarking that he in fact does not particularly like it and only tends to do so when obliged. He talked both about his mother, who "forces" him to read for 30 minutes after lunch, and about his experience at school, where the children have to read if they finish a task early. Other young (≤ 11 yrs.) participants recounted similar experiences with school, home life, and other institutions being sites where books become unavoidable. Multiple young readers also only opted (sometimes after being coaxed by parents) to participate because they had to read a book for school anyway.

Younger participants not only chose to minimize their reading time by combining participation in my research with their required reading for school, but also actively reflected on reading as an adult demand imposed on them. As such, they were not purely passive subjects but found ways to critique the intergenerational power balance. Thus, the intergenerational entanglement of my participants within the research-assemblage led to the ebb and flow of power, with children wielding power during interviews that parents arranged for them and were present actants in. Child, parent, book, and research(er) were all drawn into assemblage, with power (i.e. affect) "swirl[ing] in multiple directions" (Bernstein, "Going-to-Bed" 890).

Reflecting on my own location in this assemblage, I was surprised by the extent to which the presence of younger participants' parents affected my own dynamic with the child interviewee. The strong presence of the parents in some circumstances was affective. As Magnusson and Marecek comment on the participant-interviewer dynamic,

> [a]n essential part of the craft of interviewing is the ability to adjust the interview to suit each participant. For example, interviewers must be able to adjust the conversational tone (for instance by using a more or less formal address). They must also be able to adjust the wording of items and questions. (61)

Yet, during some interviews with the younger participants, especially in my interviews with Floor (11) and Ella (9), I was more or less interviewing two people and found myself attempting to adjust the interview so that both parent and child would be pleased with

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[258] Original text: "Mijn mama zegt juist dat ik dat misschien iets beter moet uitleggen."

participation. Floor's mother was the one who initially logged into the online meeting, and there were some brief struggles with setting up the various audio devices and headphones. As the mother made her frustration apparent, the consequent interview was marked by Floor's constant glances to just beyond the computer where her mother was sitting. In this way Floor unintentionally wielded power over the interview as well. Her mild discomfort made her hesitant to reply, which in turn impacted the questions I asked. As I explore in the next paragraph, some of those questions were, with the benefit of hindsight, more leading than those I had asked other participants. I realize now that part of me wanted to accommodate her stress vis-à-vis her mother by asking easier questions that led to a desired answer, so that she could demonstrate the ease with which she participated in a scientific study to her mother.

The merit of the semi-structured interview is its "openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the specific answers given and the stories told by the subjects" (Kvale 51), but that openness is also subject to power dynamics, as the "researcher's questioning role and the answering role of subjects produce inequality in the research relationship" (Fox and Alldred, *Sociology* 165). Floor's role was to answer my questions, but I needed her answers to be able to conduct my analyses. At the same time, Floor's mother's discernable frustration set an uncomfortable tone for the interview. As a result, my own desire as a compassionate adult to make the interview experience as enjoyable as possible for Floor clashed with my needs as a researcher to gather useful data. Thus, I expanded some questions to include more information for Floor to work with. For example, my interview guide includes a question about readers' favorite part of the story. As a follow-up question I ask "why do you like that part in particular."[259] In Floor's case, I added a number of potential examples: "Did you like the characters, or did you like it because there was a lot of action and excitement?"[260] Floor's answers to the interview questions were fairly short and often along the lines of: "I can't really think of answer right now"[261] and short one word replies like "yes", "no" and "maybe." My choice to add potential answers at the end of the question was intended to offer Floor some material to base an answer on. Floor quickly grabbed onto one of my suggestions and replied that she liked the excitement. The data is still somewhat useful, but it is nevertheless marked by my shaping of the question to be more leading and to offer her potential answers. In this instance, I was uncomfortable as a researcher who needs data, but sympathetic as a person who understood that Floor was also struggling to navigate the interview.

In that sense, my own role as an actant was different in this interview assemblage, and I wielded power, i.e. my "capacity to produce [...] change" (Leslie Green) in response to an emotional affect (unintentionally) instigated by Floor via her mother's response. While I

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[259] Original text: "Was er specifiek een reden waarom je dat stuk leuk vond?"

[260] Original text: "Misschien de personages die er waren? Omdat er veel actie was? Omdat het spannend was?"

[261] Original text: "Ik denk dat er wel dingen zijn maar dat ik ze nu niet zo direct kan vinden."

was nominally "in charge" of the interview, my own power here was subject to affect from a number of angles. In other words, my own ability to wield power was influenced by Floor and her mother's power over me even if these were not conscious choices by any involved party.

Returning now to the other participants, older readers sometimes found the shift to online interviews difficult. Jasper's (63) participation is perhaps the most telling example. His initial interview was marred by technical problems as he struggled to connect his microphone. After troubleshooting failed, the interview was ultimately conducted over the phone. Jasper also wanted to participate in the focus group but again met with various issues. After failing to connect, he borrowed his son's smartphone but struggled with the battery life and activating the microphone. Thus, Jasper's unfamiliarity with digital meeting tools left him unable to participate. Jasper's use of his son's smartphone was not the only instance of older participants involving younger relatives to help during the interview. The oldest participant, Fieke (75), participated using the laptop of one of her grandchildren, who had also been the one to arrange the interview via email and remained close-by to resolve technical difficulties. Kling (55) participated in both interviews by herself and experienced problems on both occasions, fruitlessly attempting to locate internet cables and charging cables, with the lack of the latter threatening to cut our interview short.

In Jasper's and Fieke's cases, participation was, on the one hand, hindered by their issues with the online interviewing process, but on the other hand, it was supported by their (grand)children. On the surface, their struggles with digital interviews could be argued to demonstrate their lack of power, yet at the same time, it is also exactly their intergenerational entanglement within a family structure that enables them to call up these forms of aid, which in turn empowered them as well by giving them the tools to "affect" the research-assemblage. Much in the same way, younger readers' participation was enabled and supported by their parents, a dynamic which then in turn enabled child readers to express resistance to the literature they are forced to read. In both cases, instead of looking at someone receiving help as personal powerlessness, we could also envision it as intergenerational entanglement that is both empowering and an inherent part of how their age is produced through the assemblage. Returning now to my primary definition, if we think about power (in general terms) as "the capacity to produce or prevent change" (Leslie Green; Berndtson 73), then that capacity (in this specific instance) only emerged collectively through the connection of children, parents, grandparents, literature and technology, i.e. the relationality of affect/power in the research assemblage.

I do not mean to say that age is not a factor in one's power, but rather that generalizations of adult power and children's powerlessness do not necessarily hold up to closer scrutiny. What we instead find is that when we zoom-out; that is, look "after childhood" and move the child "out of focus" (Kraftl 7): age-bound power is a product of an individual with a particular age interacting with human and non-human actants. "After childhood" does not

inherently necessitate looking for other age groups after zooming out, but in this case doing so leads into a post-age perspective where "the decentring of the categories of childhood and adulthood […] enables us to bring them closer to one another [and] helps us to re-orientate our research away from naturalised social hierarchies towards jointly agentic and ever-transformative encounters with texts" (García-González and Deszcz-Tryhubczak 50). In my research-assemblage, even aside from the concrete engagement with the book itself, which I will bring up in the next section, childhood's and adulthood's powers do not emerge as fixed factors, but as states of flux derived from the ever-changing affect economy of the research-assemblage. To borrow a phrase from Bernstein, instead of a top-down deployment of adult power, the various intergenerational entanglements in my research-assemblage led to "negotiation, collaboration, winking, and the scripted creation of space in between bodies and across perspectives of age" (Bernstein, "Going-to-Bed" 889).

The extent of my own entanglement with the participants' experiences of the interview surprised me. New materialism stresses how social researchers are an inherent part of what they research, i.e. "the investigator's role as an instrument in the constitution of evidence" (Barad 86). In my case, the digital component required me to mediate and function in a variety of roles and dynamics. Among older participants I had to offer technical support at various instances; younger adult participants were familiar with the research project and me as a researcher before the start of the interview, as they had mailed somewhat extensively with me to set everything up, while I had to introduce myself from scratch at the beginning of the interviews with younger readers. In these latter instances I also relied on the parents to allow their children to participate and to organise the digital interviews. These various dynamics in turn impacted my handling of the interviews, which – despite my best intentions – led to a more leading interview in Floor's case, for example.

My analysis above hints at the deep complexity underlying the data gathered through reader-response research. In fact, relatively little of what I discussed up to now relied on the specific replies to the qualitative questions I asked as part of the semi-structured interview. Instead, by zooming out, away from readers' direct replies to my questions, and by instead emphasizing the broader entangled web through which those answers emerge, we can see how age and readers' experience of literature is grounded in broader material and social dynamics which enrich and deepen our understanding of readers' interaction with literature.

### 3.3.5 Age, characters and power

The dynamics of entanglement and interdependency discussed above expand once fictional characters of a variety of ages are drawn into the assemblage, further bolstering the "created space" (Bernstein, "Going-to-Bed" 889). As with the power of participants, characters' power was also (in part) produced through intergenerational entanglement.

This became a significant topic of conversation via *Iep!*'s "Rescuer" character. The factor of his characterization that caused most debate was that he lives with his parents. For many participants (of various ages) this was problematic for his age. Agamemnon (11) responded to a scene where the Rescuer receives sandwiches from his mother: "older people can make their own food right? I'd think so. I hope."[262] Tommy (60) called the Rescuer a child: "he's dependent on [his parents]. They're the wise elders [...] he remains a child."[263] Yet, these assessments were countered by readers who did not take issue with the Rescuer's dynamic with his parents. Some saw it as purely positive. Janne (14) felt that "the mother cares so much for the Rescuer and I think that's sweet. [...] They definitely have a good relationship."[264] Others went further in their positive assessment and perceived the Rescuer living with his parents as *him* taking care of *them*. Helena (28) remarked that the Rescuer "has his own life and can leave whenever he wants. [...] I think he might be caring for his parents in their old age."[265] She reiterated this point during the focus group, adding that his urge to return home was not because of a desire to be pampered, but rather out of worry because he left his parents alone for a while. She repeated that "they live with him; he does not live with them."[266] Margareta (73) found this funny and responded: "different generation [laughs]; casa mama."[267]

What is discussed in the above remarks can be reduced to Green's basic definition of power. When Agamemnon comments that "older people can make their own food right?", he is criticizing the Rescuer for lacking or declining to use his own "capacity to produce change" (Leslie Green). The other replies relate to whether or not your own capacity to produce change can – or should – be shared with or delegated to others. Both in the individual interviews and in the focus group, the participants responded to the entanglement of the Rescuer with his parents to make claims about their age. The discussion thus shifted into normative appraisals of power, with participants considering not only who holds power, but who *should* hold it, how this relates to age, and how entanglement impacts power.

An interesting contrast emerges here between Margareta (73) and Helena (28). Margareta strongly believes the Rescuer's relationship with his parents is problematic. She calls their entanglement unhealthy, and (somewhat jokingly) suggests that "there is an Oedipus

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[262] Original text: "Oudere mensen kunnen toch al hun boterhammen maken? Zou ik denken hé. Hoop ik."
[263] Original text: "Hij is de afhankelijke. Zij zijn de wijze [...]. Dus hij blijft ergens een kind."
[264] Original text: "Die moeder is heel zorgzaam over de redder en dat vind ik wel lief. [...] Dus dat is zeker wel een goede band tussen die twee."
[265] Original text: "Hij heeft wel zijn eigen leven hij kan vertrekken wanneer hij het wilt. [...] En dat hij misschien wat voor hun zorgt op hun oude dag. Ja."
[266] Original text: "ja dat zij bij hem wonen eerder dan dat hij nog bij hun woont."
[267] Original text: "andere generatie hahaha. Casa mama"

complex at play here."[268] Margareta's invocation of Freudian psychology is notable. As Lorraine Green writes:

> populist contemporary views about children […] are often drawn exclusively and uncritically from traditional developmental psychology. These shape many people's beliefs about a 'good' childhood and what constitutes a 'normal' or an 'abnormal' child. ([1st edition] 40)

With regards to the Rescuer, Margareta adopts traditionally normative perspectives on generational entanglement. The child should become independent, and through that independence the child becomes an adult. Meanwhile, parents should stimulate the child's independence and distance themselves. Extended co-habitation is diagnosed as pathological. Parent and child are both at fault here for Margareta. While she believes the Rescuer lacks power and "urgently needs to separate himself from his mom,"[269] his mother wields too much power over him and "needs to let him go […] she doesn't give him any space."[270] Margareta's analysis of the characters precludes positive empowerment through intergenerational interdependence. Helena's contrasting evaluation reverses power dynamics, with the Rescuer taking care of the parents, and it normalizes them. There is no implicit or explicit criticism that this situation is in any sense problematic. Helena allows for intergenerational empowerment through entanglement. She leaves room for personal autonomy within the dynamic as well, stating that "he has his own life, he can leave when he wants to."[271] For Helena, intergenerational entanglement does not limit anyone's power and is a potentially normal and healthy part of adulthood.

Both assessments are also telling in the context of how Margareta and Helena perceived their own age. Helena identified societal pressure for her to be increasingly independent and was uncertain how she felt about this: "you have more freedom […] but also more responsibilities […] you have to take care of yourself […] I think it's both an upside and a downside."[272] Helena's less normative image of adulthood aligns with Blatterer's observation that the traditional benchmarks for adults have been subject to processes of devolution in recent decades ("Devolving" 45). As a result, "emerging adulthood" has appeared in life course studies. This phase has been described as "the only period of life in which nothing is normative demographically", leading to many being "less likely to be constrained by role requirements" (Arnett 471). This is reflected in Helena's assessment of the Rescuer. Meanwhile, Margareta structured her own age as a time of ever-increasing solitude: "you have to say goodbye to a lot of people, you realize you are old once you

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[268] Original text: "dat is daar een Oedipuscomplex ja"
[269] Original text: "die zou dringend wel eens een beetje afstand mogen nemen van zijn moeder."
[270] Original text: "die moet die loslaten hé[…] die geeft die geen ruimte."
[271] Original text: "hij heeft wel zijn eigen leven hij kan vertrekken wanneer hij het wilt."
[272] Original text: "je hebt meer vrijheden […] maar natuurlijk ook meer verantwoordelijkheden. […] je moet voor jezelf zorgen. […] Ik denk dat dat wel zowel een voordeel als een nadeel is."

have lost the generation ahead of you."[273] However, in response to my question whether participants held any criticism about the portrayal of the characters, Margareta replied that "old people should not constantly be portrayed as in need of help."[274] This interaction came shortly after Helena made her case about intergenerational entanglement, and it is difficult to not interpret this comment as a call-back to that previous conversation. Margareta thus envisions a much more solitary, autonomous, and independent adulthood as the norm.

If we want to discuss power here, the characters emerge as actants as well. In commenting about children's entanglement with plastics, Peter Kraftl argues that "nano particles are completely indifferent to children, they couldn't care less. They are *after* the child, they're *after* humans. Some of them have been produced by humans, others haven't" (Kraftl et. al 175). Yet even so, Kraftl remarks, they are present in children's lives and affect them in a plethora of ways. The same can be argued to be true for the Rescuer and his parents in *Iep!.* They are fictional, non-sentient constructs, letters on a page, and yet readers do care for them. Their relationality to each other and to readers causes positions to be adopted and reflections on participants' own ages to occur. In a very practical sense they "produce […] change" (Leslie Green). As Bernstein argues, when someone finds themselves entangled with a cultural caricature, only the reader is sentient, but she "[takes] her cues from the inanimate caricature" ("Dances" 68). The affect economy is in an intense state of flux, with Helena and Margareta adopting and shifting positions in response to each other and the characters.

Power within an assemblage is always in motion, as actants that are affected gain and lose their own ways to affect. In this sense, Helena and Margareta exist in what Pam Nilan calls "an emphatically relational contrast" (276). Although their "locations" within the assemblage can be read on their own, more can be gained if "one is […] read against the other […]. One representation of self takes its cue from the other in a double game constructed through [a] dialectical relationship" (Nilan 276). One is entering adulthood, feeling uncertain about adult life's apparent insistence that one should be an island entire of itself; the other recognizes old age as lonely but is left frustrated at depictions of older characters as helpless. The conception of age that emerges is a deeply relational one. In evaluating both their own ages, and the ages of the characters, the participants' analyses tether their own age to other age groups in a wider assemblage that further includes human and non-human actants.

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[273] Original text: "afscheid nemen van de mensen natuurlijk ook. Eens da ge de generatie voor u verloren hebt dan ineens komt ge zo van 'oei, ja, ik ben eigenlijk ook oud.'"
[274] Original text: "Je moet oudere mensen niet altijd als […] hulpbehoevend moet voorstellen."

### 3.3.6 Reader <--> World: Concluding thoughts

What "after childhood" perhaps does best is compel us to broaden our view of childhood and age. Its inherent inclusive relationality draws the human and non-human together as equals in a constantly changing web of power. In this final section of my thesis, I have explored some of these relations as they can be found in empirical reader-response data. The negotiation of age and power present in my research-assemblage was more complex than a simple adult/child power/powerlessness dichotomy, and instead entangled readers, non-readers and characters of a variety of ages through ever shifting "unequal interdependencies" (García-González and Deszcz-Tryhubczak 49). Before readers even touched the book, their involvement in my research saw them negotiate their power with non-participants *through* material actants that affected them as well. From Janne and her mother, to Fieke and Jasper, simply joining the research-project involved intergenerational entanglement. Then, as shown through Helena and Margareta, once characters are involved, negotiations of intergenerational power expand further to encompass interpretations of age in literature as well.

New materialist perspectives open up studies with children in a variety of ways. In applying such inclusivity to empirical reader-response research with children's literature, there are several potential avenues to pursue. On the one hand, we can think more inclusively of how children's literature functions as an object that readers encounter in a broader assemblage. Is it a forced encounter? Do readers offer resistance? Does that affect their perspective? What environments and actants do their participations entail? On the other hand, "after childhood" enables the book itself to have affect as well, and so if the characters become actants, what do they *do*? What precise affects do they wield, and how are readers drawn into assemblage with these characters?

In exploring how readers' ages affect their understanding of age in children's literature, there is significant value in accounting for at least some of the broader ways through which readers' age is entangled with the world such as parental/child dynamics, the impact of their professional engagements and how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the experience of reading. These are not necessarily explicitly about age but they nevertheless *entangle* age. While it is easy to claim that a reader's experience of a story does not occur in a vacuum, new materialist perspectives really do challenge us to think broadly about all that is involved in the experience of reading and its implications for our research; and through that increased awareness help us develop a greater, more complete understanding of the interaction between children's literature, the world, the human and the material.

# Chapter 4      Conclusion

This conclusion will summarize the most important findings for each research question, but also point at some broader takeaways that emerge if we zoom out and look at my research project as a whole. I begin with some more general initial reflections before moving on to discussing each research question one at a time. Afterwards, I will share some concluding thoughts and reflect one final time on the core research question: **"How does the age of the real reader affect the understanding of age in fiction for young readers?** Throughout this thesis, I ended each section with a conclusion in which I reflect on what the main results for each research-question are. Keeping that in mind, I want to avoid too much repetition and will only reiterate the most important aspects here.

I want to start by reaffirming one of the points of contention within qualitative research that I highlighted earlier in this dissertation: whether or not striving for validity, representability and other benchmarks of quantitative research is possible or even desirable for qualitative research (Brinkmann et al. 38; Seidman 8; Janesick 305). At several points in this dissertation, I emphasized that the research data I present is complex and nuanced, and that I did not find any dynamics that can be generalized across the entire population, even if we ignore my small sample size. Instead, I found a number of co-existing, sometimes complementary, and sometimes contradictory accounts. While writing this dissertation, I feared at times that by stressing this complexity and nuance in my discussions, some of my readers may be inclined to adopt a dismissive attitude predicated on the assumption that age is such a personal and unique marker of identity that readers invoke it in wholly unique ways and that thus nothing of general value can be said, i.e. the same criticism that reader-response research has always been subject to (Fish 4).

Throughout my analyses, I have attempted to counter such perspectives by using discourse from children's literature criticism and age studies as anchors around which I developed narratives about readers, their perspectives on age, and how those factors interact with literature. The point is that yes, there is a high degree of individuality in how readers respond to age in children's literature, but my data also shows that readers absolutely do not respond in a vacuum, and are highly attuned – explicitly or implicitly – to all kinds of cultural discourses on age. Through this, I identified several trends that connect the distinct individuality that each reader brought to the table. At several instances, issues and topics that age scholars have analysed in recent years were shown to indeed be significant for readers and their views on age in children's literature, such as how some readers struggled to balance the freedom and responsibility that marks early adulthood (Blatterer, "Devolving" 45; Arnett 471), or how childhood innocence is not only not a natural state, children can consciously position themselves within this discourse for their own benefit,

while still appraising characters as young for demonstrating a lack of knowledge (Kincaid 73).

## 4.1 Research Question 1: Which age norms are validated/challenged by the participants in their responses to age in children's literature and is there a relation to the age of the reader?

Among all the age norms that readers invoked to make sense of their own age and age in children's literature, four in particular stood out due to a combination of them being prominent topics in readers' reflections, while also having a long history within academic discussions on age. These are: innocence, wisdom, fantasy and imagination. Innocence and wisdom were generally ascribed to children and adults, respectively, while fantasy and imagination were discussed across childhood and adulthood. Collectively, my exploration of these four age norms encompassed half of my analyses in this dissertation. To make my final summary of this research question as succinct and clear as possible, I have opted to synthesize the most significant findings into a summary statement followed by a list of key takeaways.

### 4.1.1 Innocence

**Child readers** adopted a complex, nuanced position that balanced how they look at themselves with an awareness of how the world perceives them.

- argued that children know less than adults and need their guidance, thus validating childhood innocence as an age norm;
- consequently used characters' perceived knowledge to age them;
- used "curiosity" as a marker of youth in estimating characters' ages, because we lose our curiosity over time by gathering knowledge;
- felt that a good children's book is didactic and should teach children what they do not know;
- challenged this age norm explicitly as well by claiming to perform innocence as a ploy to escape adult ire; and
- challenged this age norm implicitly by demonstrating deep insights into characters and narratives in ways that caused adults to reconsider their own perspectives on the stories and views on children.

**Adult readers** demonstrated a matter-of-fact belief in childhood innocence, with mixed views as to whether or not childhood innocence needs to be maintained as long as possible, or whether a guided shift into adult knowledge is better.

- saw childhood innocence as normal and desirable. Young adult readers were unique in adding the reflections that innocence returns in old adulthood; and

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- (some) professed a need to enforce childhood innocence by controlling what children read, arguing – for example – that *Voor altijd samen, amen* was unsuitable for a young audience because of its subject matter.

## 4.1.2 Wisdom

**Child readers**: There was not much data. The words "wise" or "wisdom" were not used by readers younger than thirty, though they did reflect on the "knowledge" adults have, albeit mainly for the sake of discussing the comparative lack of knowledge children and child characters may or may not have.

**Adult readers** tied wisdom extensively to age via reflections on wisdom as an important and positive marker of (old) adulthood. This perspective only appeared with readers in their thirties and older, with older readers sharing this view more often. I have elected not to separate older adults from the other readers here, because the dynamics I outline appeared on a gradient, with some middle adult – and rarely early adult – readers echoing perspectives shared mainly by older readers. For instance, although it is mainly older adult readers who commented on the unusual nature of a wise child, Madelief (45) also shared this view.

- recognized the possibility that children and child characters who are faced with unusual circumstances could acquire the experience that leads to premature wisdom. However this was generally accompanied by some comment on how a wise child was unusually adult or otherwise compromised. A "normal" child is not wise;
- were more likely to point to wisdom as an important part of their own identity with age, i.e. older readers cared more about – and stressed – their own wisdom; and
- readers in their forties and older used reflections on wisdom to counter narratives of ageing as decline, by celebrating the serenity and perspective that they felt age-bound wisdom bestowed on them – thus implicitly disagreeing with young adult perspectives that innocence returns in old age.

## 4.1.3 Fantasy/imagination

**Child readers** argued that fantasy and imagination belong to childhood, but in the form of a set of nuanced and distinct consecutive developmental stages in which the last one is the disappearance of fantasy and imagination into adulthood.

- constructed fantasy and imagination as something that is positive and fun, but also strictly tied to childhood. People who seem to maintain genuine belief in unreal things after a certain age are seen as abnormal and in need of psychological help. Adults who retain fantasy are not chastised, but are seen as quirky and unusual;
- constructed adulthood as a less-fun stage in life, which is related in part to almost all adults losing imagination and fantasy as a normal part of the ageing process;

- see a possibility for adults to reinvigorate their imagination, but only in interaction with children, not by themselves;
- envisioned a person's relationship with imagination and fantasy as a loose set of developmental stages that they go through as they move from childhood to adulthood. It starts with a young child genuinely believing in fantastical things, then shifts into a slightly older child not truly believing in them but pretending to do so for the sake of play and enjoyment, to an adult who not only does not believe in fantastical things, but who also cannot find any enjoyment in it at all;
- used the above complex set of stages to judge characters' ages, consequently judging a child character's belief in ghosts as deeply problematic for his age because this fear is rooted in genuine belief; and
- affirmed the importance of didactic children's literature that helps its young reader shift away from childish things (in this case genuine belief in imagined things), and towards adulthood (in this case an awareness that the imagined or the fantastical is in fact not real).

**Adult readers** characterized fantasy and imagination as universally accepted, uncomplicated markers of childhood that (mostly) should be protected.

- defended child characters' right to genuine belief in imagined things and criticized the adult characters that were perceived as trying to take this imagination away from child characters;
- constructed childhood imagination and fantasy as the true belief in unreal things, without any of the nuance child readers added;
- agreed that adults generally have less imagination and fantasy. For some, this was the result of biological processes, others blamed sociological conditioning, or a mix of both;
- some expressed regret at their loss of childhood imagination, and shared a belief that they would never be able to regain it;
- some characterized themselves as the rare exception who managed to maintain childhood imagination into adulthood; and
- the oldest readers (70+) agreed with the idea that imagination disappears with adulthood, and added a belief that for imagination to return in old age, a person either needs to suffer from mental health issues or dementia.

The clearest differences emerged when child readers and adult readers are compared. When zooming in on more specific age groups, the data became more muddy and dependent on co-existing tendencies. Although that prohibits me from succinctly arguing that for instance, readers of a particular age group always respond in a particular way, there are nevertheless a few broader general dynamics that I find particularly striking and deserve additional emphasis.

## Conclusion

Age norm research has been around for decades. An early article by Neugarten et al. reflected on empirical data to argue that as we grow older, we start to care more and more about age norms and adhering to them (715-716). The related assumption is that children are not familiar with age norms yet and are thus more likely to not follow them or not care about them (Hunt, *Criticism* 11). Much has been written about fantasy, imagination, innocence and wisdom in this regard, such as Kincaid's claim that "innocence is a faculty needed not at all by the child but very badly by the adult who put it there in the first place" (73). To an extent, my data affirms this, e.g. compared to early adult readers, readers in their sixties and older expressed a more narrow view of what is appropriate behaviour/knowledge for specific age groups.

What my data also shows, however, especially for innocence, fantasy and imagination, is that child readers often cared more about age norm adherence than adults. It was child readers who repeatedly commented on how important it was that children's literature helps the young reader move from the innocent/imaginative child towards knowledgeable and rational adult, which was tied to a narrow construct of what each of those age groups *should* be like. Thus, in the context of children's literature's "famous 'literary-didactic split'", several child readers were on the side of didacticism (Nikolajeva, *Approaches* 2). With regard to characters, it was child readers who remarked that a character's curiosity was a young child's trait, and who commented that older children believing in ghosts was indeed problematic and needed correcting.

Meanwhile, adults' view on childhood often lacked much of the complexity and nuance that child readers introduced in their reflections on themselves. The difference between genuinely believing in imagined things and pretending to believe in them for the sake of play that several child readers affirmed, was completely absent in the way adult readers reflected on children. For them, all children genuinely believe that fantastical things really exist. Likewise, children in general were constructed as innocent by adult readers, whereas several child readers confirmed playing into this to get away with misbehaving. The fact that adult readers support their constructions of childhood by referencing various reflections on their own pasts raises interesting questions about how "memories of our younger self" could potentially be "tinted by our present perspective" (Overall 98).

In closing, how readers validated or challenged age norms in their response to children's literature is a complicated process that cannot be reduced to simple statements about specific age groups invariably responding in a specific way. However my data did reveal several patterns and showed that – in an encounter with children's literature – readers negotiate a complex awareness of age norms to give meaning and shape to their perspective on themselves and (characters in) children's literature.

## 4.2 Research Question 2: When reading a children's book, what memories are prompted in readers of different ages, and do these memories shape empathic responses to characters?

This research question encompassed two core components: the memories themselves and whether or not these affect an empathic response. With regard to the former, the interviews revealed that reading *My Name Is Mina* prompted slightly different kinds of memories when we compare child readers and adult readers. Adult readers of all ages almost exclusively talked about autobiographic memories (Olick et al. 11). Child readers also shared autobiographic memories, but supplemented these with a number of reflections that they described as memories, yet were at least partially rooted in their imagination, such as comments about how reading the book prompted a vision of flight. In doing so, child readers inadvertently affirmed scholars' observations about the entanglement of imagination and children's memory (Klingberg 35). With regard to the second component of this research question, memory was shown to be one important factor in shaping an empathic response, but it was not the only one. In my discussion, I noted a complex set of interactions in which it was not only the quantity of memory that mattered for the empathic response, but also the quality – and especially the emotions that were entangled with the prompted memories.

Among all readers, a significant finding was that there was a kind of tug-of-war between their memories of being "like" Mina as a child, and their memories of being different. The former were more likely to engender empathy, whereas the latter made it more difficult to empathize. This mirrored claims about empathy being shaped by similarity, and hampered by difference (Whitehead 57). Most of my participants, both adult and child, recognized that in some ways, they had experienced similar things as Mina did, but because a much larger part of their memories failed to align (and they thus perceived Mina as strange or alien), they could not empathize. For adult readers, this meant that the book as a whole did not prompt much empathy. One of the younger readers, however, used his broader interpretation of "memory" as a resource he drew on to find an alternative target for his empathy: a tree Mina carves her name into. A significant additional factor that came into play here, was the particular emotional weight that memories can have. In the case of Merlijn (11), the young reader who empathized with the tree, that emphasis was rooted in imagined rage on the tree's part. At the same time, the adult readers who commented on their own lack of empathy with Mina also did not attach any particular emotional weight to the few memories that they did recall in response to Mina's plight. In contrast, there was one adult reader who, while reading *My Name Is Mina,* found herself remembering deeply unhappy childhood memories of being excluded and bullied at school, which led to several

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explicit reflections on the empathy she felt for Mina. In other words, if a memory has a strong emotional connection (in my participants' case: rage and sadness), these can function as "affective traces" that not only anchor the memory, but also supports the process of recalling these events under the particular circumstances of reading a book (Waller 90-92). Note, for instance, that the act of reading was what made Barbara (38) unearth memories that she claimed to otherwise no longer be consciously aware off.

Thus, in my experiment, the data suggests that a reader's empathic response to a character is indeed partially shaped by them acknowledging overlapping experiences with said character, which can take on the form of memories. However, surface level overlap may not be enough to stimulate an empathic response. Instead, an emotional link becomes vital, not only because it reinforces empathy, but also because it further enables children's literature to reawaken otherwise inaccessible memories.

## 4.3 Research Question 3: How do readers of different ages engage with the extraordinary activities that are included in David Almond's *My Name Is Mina*?

The rationale behind this research question was fairly simple. Rather than taking the reader as a vantage point to look at the book, what if we take the book as our vantage point to look at the reader? *My Name Is Mina* lent itself perfectly to such an approach due to it containing several activities for the reader to do. Furthermore, the shift in methodology that accompanied my exploration of this research question enabled me to explore readers' responses from new angles. Ultimately, the data revealed a complex web of entanglement between external factors imposed on readers because of their age, readers' own beliefs about age, their reflections on childhood memories, and their thoughts on their imagination and fantasy skills, among others.

Readers' engagement with the activities provided intriguing data beyond the creative responses they produced. What quickly became clear, was that readers' ages had not only shaped the finished "extraordinary activities", but had fundamentally played a part in the way in which they (felt they) could respond. For instance, adult readers claimed to struggle with several of the extraordinary activities on account of their lost imagination. This mirrored various participant comments I highlighted earlier in my section on fantasy and imagination as age norms. In addition, some activities were perceived as silly and caused adult readers to feel constrained by feelings of shame, even in the privacy of their own home. The idea of social constructs of age offering guidance at the risk of becoming "oppressive" is well known (Golub et al. 278; Blatterer, "Redefinition" 1.2). Here, asking readers to engage with *Mina*'s activities led several of them to comment on how much their adult status limited them in their engagement with these activities. In contrast, the data actually showed that – at least in one way – adult readers were correct in assuming

that a child reader would be able to respond in a more carefree manner. The youngest participant was the only one to introduce fantasy elements in their replies to the activities, and indeed made no remarks about feeling ashamed.

Yet, the data also revealed glimpses of "kinship" between child and adult readers (Gubar, "Hermeneutics"). Completing the activities required readers to perform actions that were guided by where they found the time to read. For instance, Michiel (12) read in the study hall at school, while Leen (30) read on the train while commuting to work. School and work are, respectively, key markers of childhood (Mortimer and Moen 113) and adulthood (Blatterer, "Redefinition" 3.5), and Michiel and Leen were alike in having to find the time to engage with these activities while juggling the obligations imposed on them by the institutions that dominant age norms expect them to partake in. Both readers reflected on the ways in which the environments where they found themselves influenced their engagement with the activities.

Finally, readers' ages were also thematized explicitly in some of their responses. Griet (58) and Astrid (68), the oldest readers, were the only ones who felt comfortable sending their full completed activities to me, and more importantly, used these as an opportunity to reflect on (their) age and what it means for them. In that way, they offered a counterpoint for the shame that younger adult readers felt, by instead opting to not only make age visible in some of their replies, but to reflect on some of their doubts and uncertainties about ageing.

In a nutshell, readers of different ages engaged with Mina's extraordinary activities in environments that were entangled with their age; by both making age visible in their replies and exploring their thoughts and concerns about age; and by struggling to complete some of these activities because of a sense of shame that was linked to adulthood. Although age was thus shown to be a factor that introduced fundamental differences in how readers of different ages engaged with *My Name Is Mina*'s extraordinary activities, it also was a thread that connected readers' experiences in some ways, mainly by demonstrating that social constructs of age place demands on people of all ages.

## 4.4 Research Question 4: How do power, age and matter become enmeshed in readers' participation in a reader-response project on children's literature?

The starting point for this research question was my observation that the COVID-19 pandemic had a number of interesting consequences for the power dynamics in my research project. This inspired me to use new materialism as a framework to perform a "retrospective rereading of data" (Malone 186) with the intent of re-evaluating my research project as an assemblage in which readers have power but in which power is also

exercised on them. At several points throughout my thesis, I emphasized that readers do not respond to a book in a vacuum. With this final research question, I aimed to position this entanglement and interrelation as the key focus of inquiry. I ended up exploring two distinct yet related topics: how age becomes entangled with power in the process of recruiting participants and conducting the interviews, and how a character's perceived (lack of) power and independence was received by readers.

By zooming out beyond the transcripts themselves, and instead taking the entire research-process as my object of study, it quickly became apparent that readers' participation was not only entangled in a web of material and power relations, age was one of the key factors in that web. For many readers, participating in my research project was only possible due to them being part of an intergenerational family structure, especially with the youngest and oldest participants. In the case of the youngest readers, it was parents who encountered my calls for participation, got in touch with me and set up the computer for the interview. With older readers, the digital interviewing tools that were necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic became an impediment, as some did not have a computer, microphone, or even internet. For them, participation was only possible after they received help from younger family members. With young participants in particular, these power relationships influenced the interview directly, as parents were always in the room with young readers, sometimes even whispering answers from off-screen. Rather than seeing these events as context at best, or introducing bias at worst, I propose that a more productive takeaway is to use them as examples that age is not just an individual quality, but emerges through these interactions as well.

Characters were also part of this complex dynamic, with *Iep!*'s Rescuer character and his relationship with his parents leading to interesting discussions. Some saw him as problematically powerless and under the control of his parents, which does not fit with his adult status. Others saw him as an independent caretaker who chooses to live with his parents to support them, while still enjoying his freedom. Readers' own ages became entangled in this discussion, with one older adult reader stressing a belief in an independent, solitary adulthood, whereas a younger adult reader commented on the difficulties of balancing freedom and responsibility in adulthood.

Upon zooming out, the line between research method, researcher, topic of inquiry and participant blurs slightly. Qualitative researchers have stressed the impossibility and perhaps undesirability of retaining objective distance as a qualitative researcher because we are part of what we research (Leavy 3; Cohen et al. 131; Van der Tuin 6). In my case, the act of researching readers' perspectives on their own age and age in children's literature in part produced their age. Participants negotiated intergenerational relationships to be able to participate, while characters led to discussions on which intergenerational dynamics are healthy and normal, and by extension, caused readers to position themselves in this debate. Through this, readers employed and navigated power

dynamics to "enact" (see Sparrman 244) their ages in different ways, from stressing independent autonomy, to intergenerational dependency, and everything in between.

## 4.5 Closing Thoughts

In the introduction to my thesis, I pitched the significance of this research project by referring to the issue of intergenerational antagonism, which has intensified in recent years (a.o. Dykstra and Fleischmann 110; Gullette 230; Francioli and North; Joosen, *Oud* 5). At the same time, this research project was, at its core, not an attempt to actively engender intergenerational friendship through discussing literature, but about exploring a new avenue for understanding intergenerational dynamics and social constructs of age. Of course, I hope that my findings can be useful as part of the groundwork for other research or practices that aim to engender intergenerational understanding. That being said, I would be remiss to ignore that there were several moments throughout multiple interview cycles where the act of participating in my research project did seem to actively engender intergenerational understanding among adult readers, sometimes leading to changed views and new insights. I am thinking for instance, of the impact Ella (9) had on the adult readers during one group discussion on *Iep!*, where both Moon (41) and Eline (67) afterwards reflected on how much Ella's perspective had meant for them and that both of them had reconsidered their initial viewpoints. Likewise, reading *My Name Is Mina* not only made forgotten memories stir in Barbara (38), those memories were then promptly put to use in empathizing with a child character. There were several of these small moments where it became apparent that for some adult readers, children's literature and conversations with child readers can open doors to increased empathy, respect or understanding with fictional and real children.

In stating this, I also feel obliged to add that child readers never acknowledged such a change in perspective. The three child readers that I conducted a second interview with told me that they learned little to nothing from participating, certainly not with regard to their view on adults and adulthood. These responses align with the strictness that child readers demonstrated throughout my research project in how they constructed age. In various ways, children did not emerge as free-spirited or open-minded thinkers with regard to how to construct age, but often enforced or promoted age norms and aetonormative perspectives. This emerged across several interview-cycles and in a number of ways, ranging from their views on imagination and fantasy, to their belief in the need to grow up, or their support of didactic literature that guides the child into adulthood, just to reiterate a few examples. Furthermore, these views were often not a matter of implicit nuances that I detected between the lines of otherwise innocuous comments, but explicit statements born from a particular and conscious understanding of how society constructs age, what is considered normal, and how characters or real human beings are failing or succeeding to match those expectations.

In a nutshell, aside from the specific research questions that I have explored in this dissertation, I found that empirical reader-response research which focuses on age and contains an intergenerational component, seems to have potential for engendering intergenerational understanding on the part of adults. I did not find this dynamic to hold up for child readers, but as previously acknowledged, the interviews were not designed to be active attempts at engendering intergenerational friendship in the first place. I also want to note that several child readers did demonstrate pre-existing nuanced views on adults (e.g. Janne's views on her father and Ella's views on grandparents). It would be both possible and interesting to develop empirical reader-response research in which the core emphasis is placed on stimulating intergenerational understanding by using children's literature as a starting point.

There is one more takeaway that emerged beyond the bounds of any particular one of my research questions that I wish to emphasize. My research project as a whole was predicated on the assumption that the qualities of children's literature that make it unique in terms of discourse on age (for example: its generally high variety of characters of different ages, the explicit thematization of age, and a built-in age disparity between audience and producers) would make it highly suitable as a starting point for qualitative research into the social construction of age. By looking at the quality and quantity of the data I gathered, I would argue that this assumption has been proven correct. Asking readers of different ages to reflect on age in children's literature was an engaging avenue of questioning that participants had a lot to say about. In the end, I can safely say that this thesis only covers a fraction of what could be extracted from the data. Had I had the space, I would have added analyses of readers' own use of metareflections, and explored the traits readers point to when they argue that a character is "true to life" in terms of age, among other topics that were left un(der)explored in this dissertation. The point is that, aside from offering valuable insight into readers' responses, this dissertation also demonstrates the merit and potential of participatory intergenerational research using children's literature as an avenue for gathering data.

So, in a single paragraph, I want to formulate an answer to the original core research question: **How does the age of the real reader affect the understanding of age in fiction for young readers?** I would argue that it does so in interaction with other readers, with age norms that reader consciously or accidentally confirm or challenge; it does so by guiding readers into particular locations and institutions that affect their reading experience and partially determine their responses; it does so intergenerationally, with readers experiencing literature and academic research as part of a family unit; it does so idiosyncratically, with some views on age shaping the reading experience in deeply personal ways; it does so by creating temporal distance between readers and characters who are much younger or older, thus leading older readers to reflect back on a childhood that they may not remember accurately, and young readers to envision an adulthood that they may essentialize into a rigid set of expectations; it does so by interacting with the

beliefs readers have about what children's literature should do in the first place; and it does so in a flexible way, with some readers tweaking their perspectives by talking about them with other readers of different ages. To my readers, age was everything and it was nothing. It both emerged at unexpected times to inform readings in small innocuous ways, while also being actively and resoundingly rejected by readers at other occasions. It connected readers of disparate ages through unexpected forms of kinship while also leading readers of chronologically similar ages to adopt different perspectives.

At the end of this four-year journey into exploring readers' responses to age in children's literature, I have become all the more convinced that children's literature is a truly fascinating and engaging object of study for any qualitative researcher interested in exploring age, readers' responses and the intersection between the two. I hope my reader will permit me the quip that age is indeed not just a number, it is also an amazing topic for empirical, reader-response research.

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# Appendices

## 1. Initial research questions

Reader focused questions:

- Do readers of different ages use more specific ideologies or doctrines to base their understanding of age in?
- What do readers base their insights in other age groups on?
- Which age norms are validated/challenged by the participants in their responses to age in children's literature and is there a relation to the age of the reader?
- How do readers perceive their own age category?
- Does the age of the reader affect the use of kinship and difference models of childhood and adulthood in analyses of children's literature?
- Does the age of the reader affect the adoption of an aetonormative perspective in their analysis of children's literature?
- Do readers tend to emphasize age norms as factual, or do they link to theories of age that are more socially constructed?
- In their assessment of different age groups, what traits (physical, mental, behaviour,…) do readers of different ages most commonly connect to different age groups?
- Do some age groups identify more age norms/ageism in children's literature than other age groups?
- Does an increased identification of age norms/ageism in certain age groups result in an increase in the critique thereof?
- Do readers see children's literature as having affected their identity? (In response to children's literature in general)
- How do older readers assess their engagement with children's literature over their life course?
- How do older readers who admit to enjoying children's literature in the past, but disliking it now, explain this shift?
- Do readers of different ages emphasize different elements of a book in determining whether a book is "suitable" for children?
- What factors do readers of different ages bring forth that determine whether a children's book is "good"? (According to their own definition of "good")

Reader – book questions:

- How does the age of the real reader affect the understanding of characters in children's literature?
- How do readers of different ages link characters' (perceived) motivation to age?
- What age norms do readers rely on most in their understanding of characters?
    - Does the prevalence of certain age norms correlate to the age of the readers?
- What social categories (ethnicity, gender, species, …) do readers most often bring up in connection to characters of different age groups?
- Do readers of different ages differ in how they connect the construction of age to gender?
- Do readers of different ages connect their own life's experiences to their understanding of age in children's literature?
- In determining the age of a character, do readers predominantly rely on a character's physical description (height, hair, muscle development) or social elements (actions, dialogue, thoughts)?
- What elements of characterization do readers of different ages consider to be the most difficult to link to a specific age?
- In children's literature that features characters who age over the course of the story, what elements of characterization do readers of different ages identify as changing as a result of the aging process?
- Do readers of different ages apply certain adjectives to characters of different ages with the same frequency as children's literature?
- Does the age of the reader affect the prevalence of mimetic and semiotic readings?
- Are readers of different ages critical of the representation of characters of different age groups in children's literature?
- What factors do readers of different ages quote as determining the character they would like to be?
- In children's literature that portrays intergenerational conflict, do readers of different ages empathize in a different way and/or with different characters?
- How do readers of different ages explain their (lack of) identification with the characters?
- Do readers of different ages vary in the type of traits they identify as sharing with characters in children's literature?
- Is there a difference between a reader's favourite character, the character they would like to be and the character in which they recognize themselves? If so, what reasons do the participants mainly cite as determining this difference?
- Do readers of a certain age group talk most often about characters of their own age group, younger characters, or older characters?
- When readers pick a favourite/least favourite character, do they bring up age?

- Do readers of different ages select different scenes as their favourite in children's literature?
- What factors do readers of different ages cite as determining why a scene is their favourite scene?
- How do readers of different ages connect age to the visual representation of characters in children's literature?
- Do readers of different ages see children's literature as contributing to their internalization of age norms as a child?
- Do readers see children's literature as having affected their identity?
- Do readers draw didactic values/morals from the chosen literature?
- Do readers of different ages emphasize different elements of a book in determining whether a book is "suitable" for children?
- What factors do readers of different ages bring forth that determine whether a children's book is "good"? (According to their own definition of "good")

## Intergenerational interaction:

- How do different age groups interact with each other in discussing age in children's literature?
- How does interaction with other age groups (in a focus group conversation) affect one's insight into age norms in literature for young readers?
- How do readers of different ages perceive intergenerational interaction in children's literature?

## 2. Consent form

Ik,……………………………………………………………………………………………,

bevestig hierbij mijn vrijwillige deelname aan het onderzoek "Constructing Age for Young Readers." Ik weet dat er persoonlijke gegevens van mij verzameld zullen worden (naam, gender, geboortedatum, lezersprofiel, contactgegevens) en dat er opnames gemaakt worden van mijn deelname aan het project, maar dat deze gegevens verwerkt in overeenstemming met de Europese wetgeving (conform de Algemene Verordening Gegevensbescherming). Mijn deelname is vrijwillig en ik weet dat ik mij kan terugtrekken uit dit onderzoek indien gewenst.

Handtekening

Datum

Naam:

Email:

Geboortedatum:

Telefoonnummer:

# 3. *Iep!* interview guide

| Fase 1: kennismaking | 10 min |
|---|---|
| **Doel**: Eva Magnusson en Jeanne Marecek raden in hun boek over kwalitatieve interviews aan om een opwarmgesprek te laten plaatsvinden voor de aanvang van het echte interview. Ze benadrukken dat deze vragen deels of volledig niet gerelateerd mogen zijn aan het echte onderzoek (56; zie ook King en Horrock 56).<br><br>Om hier rekening mee te houden wil ik eerst een kort kennismakingsgesprek houden, gericht op het benadrukken dat er geen foute antwoorden zijn en het creëren van een ontspannen sfeer. | |

- De onderzoeker stelt zich kort voor.
  - o Mijn naam is Leander Duthoy, ik ben doctoraatsstudent aan het Constructing Age For Young Readers project. Onder toezicht van professor Vanessa Joosen. Dit is het eerste jaar van mijn onderzoek, dat in totaal 4 jaar zal duren.
  - o De andere persoon die je in dit gesprek ziet is professor Vanessa Joosen, zij beheert het hele project en zal dus vandaag meeluisteren met dit interview.
- Hoe wilt u graag aangesproken worden voor dit interview?

<div align="center" style="color:red">[BEGIN OPNAME]</div>

**Korte toelichting onderzoek:**
- Ons onderzoeksproject bestudeert leeftijd in kinderliteratuur. Mijn specifiek deel van het onderzoek kijkt naar **hoe de leeftijd van de echte lezer het begrip en de interpretatie van leeftijd in kinderliteratuur beïnvloedt.** Daarvoor ben ik in dit interview voornamelijk benieuwd naar hoe jij kijkt naar de leeftijd van de personages in dit verhaal en naar leeftijd in het algemeen.
- Bespreking van ethische documenten:
  - o Informatiebrief:
  - o Consent form
  - o Confidentialiteit: uw identiteit en uw deelname aan deze studie worden strikt vertrouwelijk behandeld en wij volgen hierbij de Europese wetgeving (de Algemene Verordening Gegevensbescherming van 25 mei 2018). U zult niet bij naam of op een andere herkenbare wijze geïdentificeerd worden in dossiers, resultaten of publicaties in verband met de studie.
  - o **Vrijwillig stoppen**: U neemt geheel vrijwillig deel aan deze studie en u hebt het recht te weigeren eraan deel te nemen. U heeft steeds de

mogelijkheid om al dan niet aan deze studie deel te nemen of om uw deelname aan de studie stop te zetten.

**Vragen van:**
- Naam
- Geboortedatum
- Pseudoniem

**Korte toelichting interview:**
- Het is een informeel, rustig gesprek. Maak je zeker comfortabel en neem nog iets om te drinken als je dat wilt.
- Er zijn **geen foute antwoorden**, je mag echt zeggen wat je wilt.
- **Neen** is een volledig antwoord, voel je niet geforceerd om iets te antwoorden omdat ik een vraag stel. Als je geen antwoord hebt is dat het juiste antwoord.
- Je mag gerust even **nadenken voor je antwoord**, er is geen haast.
- Je mag altijd nog even **terugkomen op een vorige vraag**, ook al zijn we al over iets anders aan het praten.
- Soms kan het zijn dat ik vraag **voor verduidelijking**, dat is zeker niet het teken dat je antwoord slecht was, maar eerder dat ik het erg interessant vond en graag meer informatie wil.
- **Stiltes** zijn ok
- Heb jij nog vragen over de vormgeving van het interview voor we beginnen? Het interview zal **ongeveer een uur duren**.

**Introductie-gesprek over leeftijd en kinderliteratuur:**
- Lees je veel? Hoeveel boeken ongeveer per maand?
- Welke genres lees je voornamelijk?
    o Welke verschillen merk je op tussen de boeken die je nu leest en de boeken die je las toen je jonger was?
    o Lees je soms kinderboeken?/ Lees je soms nog boeken die voor oudere lezers bedoeld zijn?
        ▪ Waarom wel/niet?
        ▪ **Indien niet**: Wanneer ben je daar mee gestopt? Is dat langzaamaan gebeurd of eerder plots?
- Welke leeftijdsgroepen kan je opsommen? OF In welke categorieën verdeel jij mensen op basis van leeftijd?
    o Baby's
    o In welke leeftijdsgroep zou je jezelf plaatsen? Waarom?
- Wat vind jij zoal leuk aan jouw leeftijd?

| - En zijn er ook nadelen aan jouw leeftijd? | |
|---|---|
| Fase 2: Algemene beleving van boek/kinderliteratuur | 15 min |
| Doel: Eerste benadering van het onderwerp leeftijd. In deze fase werken we vanuit de lezer naar het boek. M.a.w., alle concrete elementen uit het boek worden aangehaald door de deelnemer zelf. | |

**Algemeen:**

- <mark>Wat was je favoriete stuk uit het boek?</mark>
  - o Potentiële bijvragen naargelang gekozen scene:
    - ▪ Had je gedacht dat dat personage dat zou doen?
    - ▪ Waarom vond je dat grappig/spannend/triest/…?
    - ▪ Heb je zelf ook al ooit zoiets meegemaakt?
    - ▪ Zijn dat soort momenten typisch voor kinderliteratuur volgens jou?
    - ▪ …
- <mark>Waren er stukken van het boek die herkenbaar waren voor jou?</mark>
  - o <mark>Focus op het idee van herkenbaarheid → waarom is dat stuk herkenbaar voor je, heb je ook ooit al zoiets meegemaakt?</mark>

**Indrukken over personages en hun leeftijden:**

- De geïnterviewde persoon kreeg voor het interview een digitaal formulier opgestuurd waarbij gevraagd werd om de volgende personages te rangschikken op leeftijd:

| Warre | De moeder van de redder |
|---|---|
| Tine | De vader van de redder |
| De jongen in de groene afdeling | Loetje |
| De redder | Bor |

(Vraag aan deelnemers of ze terug gekeken hebben in het boek.)

- Waarom heb je personage x als jongst ingeschat? Wat maakt dat personage jonger dan personage y?

- Waar zou jij de lijn zetten tussen de volwassen personages en de niet volwassen personages?
  - o Zie je een verschil tussen hoe de volwassen personages zich gedragen en de jongere personages? Waarin zijn ze anders?

- Welke onderlinge verschillen merk je op tussen de personages van dezelfde leeftijd, hoe denk je dat dat komt?

  o Merk het **geslacht** van de personages op.

- Wie vond je het moeilijkste om een leeftijd te geven? Wie het makkelijkste? En waarom?

  o Waren de prenten belangrijk?

## Persoonlijke links met personages:

- Welk personage zou je het **liefst zijn**?
  o Waarom?
  o Waarom heb je geen voorkeur voor....
  o Gedraagt dat personage zich zoals jij zou verwachten dat iemand van die leeftijd zich gedraagt?
- Wat was je **favoriet** personage?
  o Waarom?
  o Gedraagt dat personage zich zoals jij zou verwachten dat iemand van die leeftijd zich gedraagt?
- Was er een personage dat je helemaal niet leuk vond?
  o Waarom?
  o Gedraagt dat personage zich zoals jij zou verwachten dat iemand van die leeftijd zich gedraagt?
- Welk personage **lijkt het meeste** op jou?


- Welk personage denk je dat het dichtste in leeftijd staat bij jou?
  o Voelde je je verbonden met dat personage? Waarom wel/niet?
  o Brengt dat personage specifieke gevoelens bij je op?
  o Vind je dat dat personage een geloofwaardig beeld geeft van iemand van jouw leeftijd?
    ▪ Zijn er delen van de manier waarop dat personage afgebeeld wordt die je niet zo goed of raar vindt?
  o Vind je dat de personages van andere leeftijden geloofwaardig zijn?
    ▪ Zijn er delen van de manier waarop dat personages van andere leeftijden afgebeeld worden die je niet zo goed of raar vindt?
- Wie denk jij dat de protagonist/held van het verhaal is?

    ▪ Waarom?
    ▪ Kon je je inleven in dat personage?
- Deden de personages je denken aan mensen uit je eigen leven?

o Op welke manier?

Geschiktheid voor kinderen:

- Denk je dat Iep een geschikt/goed boek is voor kinderen? Waarom wel of niet?
- Is het boek ook geschikt/goed voor volwassenen?
- Denk je dat kinderen iets uit het verhaal kunnen leren?

- Denk je dat volwassenen iets uit het verhaal kunnen leren?

  o Denk je dat dat een goede les is om te leren?

  o Denk je dat als mensen van verschillende leeftijden het boek lezen, ze dezelfde les gaan leren?

- Wat maakt een kinderboek "goed" voor jou? Je mag zelf bepalen wat "goed" betekent.
  o Is Iep dan een "goed" kinderboek?

| Fase 3: Specifieke vragen over elementen uit het boek. | 15 min |
|---|---|

**Doel**: In de vorige fase bracht de deelnemer zelf specifieke elementen uit het boek aan. In deze fase brengt de interviewer elementen uit het boek aan, en wordt aan de deelnemer gevraagd om een mening/reactie daarop te geven. Hierbij werken we dus vanuit het boek naar de lezer.

Karakterisering/constructie van leeftijd:

- In het boek zeggen ze niet hoe oud Warre en Tine zijn, maar hoe oud denk jij dat ze zijn?
  o Waarom?
  o Waarom zijn ze niet [oud/jong/volwassen/...] volgens jou?
  o Denk je dat Warre en Tine gelukkiger zijn op het einde van het verhaal?
  o Welke rol speelde Viegeltje in hun leven?
- Vind je dat Warre en Tine veranderen doordat ze Viegeltje leren kennen?
  o Op welke manier?
  o Hoe denk je dat dat komt?
  o Waarom denk jij dat Tine voor Viegeltje een cape/jasje maakt?
- Denk je dat Viegeltje zou gebleven zijn als Tine en Warre haar anders hadden behandeld?
- Zag jij een verandering in Viegeltje naargelang ze ouder werd?
- Denk jij dat Viegeltje voornamelijk een kindje of een vogeltje is?
  o Hoe zie je dat?
- Merk je een verschil in hoe Warre en Tine eerst reageren als ze Viegeltje zien, en hoe dat Loetje reageert? Hoe denk je dat dat komt?
- Hoe oud denk je dat Loetje is?

- o Waaraan kan je dat zien?
- o Zou je zeggen dat ze zich jonger, ouder of hetzelfde gedraagt als andere kinderen uit haar leeftijdsgroep?
- Aan het einde van het boek zoeken heel wat mensen Viegeltje. Kan jij me vertellen waarom Loetje, de redder, Warre en Tine Viegeltje zoeken?
- Waarom stoppen de personages met zoeken naar Viegeltje?
- Is de jongen die Warre, Tine en de redder ontmoeten volwassen? Waarom wel/niet?

**Intergenerationele verschillen en interacties:**

- Kan je me vertellen wat jij vindt van de vriendschap tussen de volgende personages?
    - o Warre, Tine & Loetje
    - o Viegeltje, Warre en Tine
    - o Bor en Loetje <-> Loetje, Warre en Tine
    - o Warre, Tine en de redder
    - o Indien positieve evaluatie: Kan je uitleggen waarom deze personages goed bevriend raken? → waarom werkt hun vriendschap?
    - o Bijvragen:
        - ▪ Valt het op dat er een leeftijdsverschil is?
        - ▪ Waarom denk je dat de redder de 20 jarige jongen onder zijn hoede wil nemen?
        - ▪ …
- Waarom denk je dat de volgende personages zo aan elkaar gehecht zijn of raken?
    - o Warre/Tine
    - o Bor/Loetje

- Kan je de relatie tussen de redder en zijn ouders eens beschrijven?
- Kan je de relatie tussen Loetje en haar vader eens beschrijven?
    - o Welke dingen denk jij dat invloed hebben gehad op die twee relaties?
        - ▪ We weten weinig uit het boek, je mag dit zelf aanvullen met je eigen ideeën.
    - o Waarom denk je dat die verschillen er zijn?
        - ▪ Kan je leeftijd aan die verschillen linken?
    - o Vind je de relaties geloofwaardig? Zijn mensen echt zo?
    - o Wat vind je goed aan de relatie tussen de redder en zijn ouders, en wat vind je niet goed?

|  |  |
|---|---|
| <ul><li>o Wat vind je goed aan de relatie tussen Loetje en haar vader, en wat vind je niet goed?</li><li>o Wat denk je dat Loetje's vader bedoelt met: "Ik kan je nu even niet gebruiken.", waarom zou hij dat zeggen?<ul><li>▪ Begrijp je zijn reactie?</li></ul></li></ul>- Waarom denk je dat de schrijfster Loetje's vader zo heeft geschreven?<br>- Wat voor rol speelt de vader in het boek?<br>- Waarom denk je dat de mensen van het Horstel Loetje weghalen bij Warre, Tine en de redder?<br>- Welke personages denk jij dat het gelukkigst zijn op het einde van het verhaal? |  |

| Fase 4: Lezen en bespreken van fragmenten | 15 min |
|---|---|

**Doel:** Na het lezen van een volledig boek vergeet men soms kleine interessante momenten uit het verhaal. Daarom heb ik enkele korte fragmenten en prenten geselecteerd die samen gelezen en besproken worden. Dit is ook de meest concrete fase uit het interview waarbij specifieke elementen uit *Iep* worden uitgelicht. De gebruikte prenten en fragmenten staan in bijlage 2 en 3.

**Fragmenten:**

Het relevante fragment wordt samen nog eens gelezen. Nadien wordt het besproken en worden er vragen gesteld.

- Loetje's droom over haar vader: p70-72
  - o Wat denk jij dat Loetje's droom betekent?
  - o Waarom vindt ze het niet leuk om op het ei te zitten?
  - o Waarom zou haar vader in het ei zitten?
  - o Waarom verdwijnt de vader op het einde?
  - o [bespreek de prent]

- Bor en Loetje gaan de redder, Warre en Tine halen: p128-129
  - o Waarom willen Warre, de redder en Tine eerst niet mee?
  - o Wat bedoelen ze met "knussigheid", waarom is dat voor hun zo belangrijk? Waarom is dat niet zo belangrijk voor Loetje en Bor?
  - o Vind je dat Warre, Tine, de redder en Loetje hier goed overeen komen? Waarom wel/niet?

- De redder en zijn ouders: p93,141
  - o Hoe zou jij de relatie tussen de redder en zijn ouders beschrijven?
  - o Wat blijft jou het meeste bij over de ouders van de redder?
  - o Hoe oud denk jij dat de ouders van de redder zijn?

- o Denk je dat hun leeftijd iets te maken heeft met hun gedrag?
- o Kan er volgens jou iets beter in de relatie tussen deze personages?

- Loetje en haar vader: p67
  - o Wat voelde je toen je deze paragraaf las?
  - o Waar dacht je aan toen je dit eerst las?
  - o Waarom is papa boos in dit fragment?
  - o Waarom denk jij dat Loetje niet antwoordde?
  - o Wat denk jij dat de beste manier is om om te gaan met dit soort situaties?

- De oppas en Loetje: p61
  - o Waarom denk je dat Loetje het leuk vindt om voor de tv te eten?
  - o Vind je de oppas een goede oppas? Waarom wel/niet?
  - o Hoe oud denk je dat de oppas is?
  - o Denk je dat het kwaad kan dat Loetje op tv naar bloederige programma's kijkt?

- Tine leert Viegeltje eten: p30-35
  - o Waarom wordt Tine hier boos?
  - o Denk je dat Tine gelijk had om hier boos te worden? Of had ze niet tegen Viegeltje mogen roepen?
  - o Waarom willen Warre en Tine dat Viegeltje beleefd leert eten?

- Kind kunnen lenen: p19-20
  - o Waarom zegt Warre dat ze het te leen hebben?
  - o Was deze uitspraak je opgevallen? Waar dacht je aan toen je dit las?
  - o Toen je het las, hoe oud beeldde je je de mensen in die vroegen waar dat je een kind kon lenen?
- Taal aanleren:
  - o Waarom denk je dat ik je die twee fragmenten heb laten lezen?
  - o Welke verschillen merk je op in de manier waarop Loetje en Warre en Tine omgaan met Viegeltje's spraakproblemen?
  - o Hoe denk je dat dat komt?

**Prenten:**

- Prent van het kunstwerk van de jongen uit de groene gang:

> - o Waarom denk je dat de jongen de klei die vorm heeft gegeven? En hoe link je dat met de naam *Gedachten?*
> - o Hoe oud denk jij dat de jongen was die dit maakte?
> - o Beschrijf de vorm van dit kunstwerkje eens.
> - Prent van Viegeltje met haar rode schoentjes aan:
>   - o Waar denkt Viegeltje nu aan volgens jou?
>   - o Heb jij je ook ooit al zo gevoeld? Wanneer?
>
> - Prent van Tine die Viegeltje eten geeft:
>   - o Zou je zeggen dat Tine in deze prent eerder blij of niet blij is? Waarom denk je dat? Wat denk je dat Tine hier zou willen?
>   - o Als je tegen Tine en Viegeltje kon spreken op dit moment, wat zou je dan zeggen?
>
> - Prent van de redder en zijn ouders:
>   - o Hoe zie je op deze prent het verschil in leeftijd?
>   - o Vind je dat dat correct is afgebeeld?
>   - o Als het boek geen prenten bevatte, had je deze personages dan ook zo ingebeeld?
>   - o Heb jij je ook ooit zo al gevoeld? Wanneer?
>
> - Prent van Loetje's droom:
>   - o Deze droom wordt in het verhaal zelf niet besproken. Wat zie jij hier in? Wat droomt Loetje over haar vader? Hoe denk jij dat dat komt?
>   - o Wat betekenen de papieren in de droom?
>
> - Prent van de vader van Loetje die van de trap wandelt:
>   - o Als je een gedachtenballonnetje kon invullen bij Loetje's vader, wat zou hij dan nu aan het denken zijn?
>   - o Heb jij je ook al ooit zo gevoeld? Wanneer?
>
> - Prenten van Bor's spoken
>   - o Denk je dat zo een dingen inbeelden typisch is voor kinderen van Bor's leeftijd?
>   - o Is het nodig dat Bor hiervoor in het Horstel verblijft?

| Fase 5: Afronding | 5 min |
|---|---|

**Doel:** Als afsluiter vraag ik hoe de geïnterviewde persoon denkt dat de rest van het leven van de belangrijkste personages eruit zal zien. Dit geeft nog een laatste indicatie van hoe de lezer de personages heeft ingeschat en stelt vast hoe ze verwachten dat de personages zullen veranderen als ze ouder worden.

- Wat denk je dat er met Tine, Warre, Loetje, de jongen en de redder gaat gebeuren in de toekomst? Gaan ze contact houden met elkaar? Denk je dat de jongen echt een redder wordt?
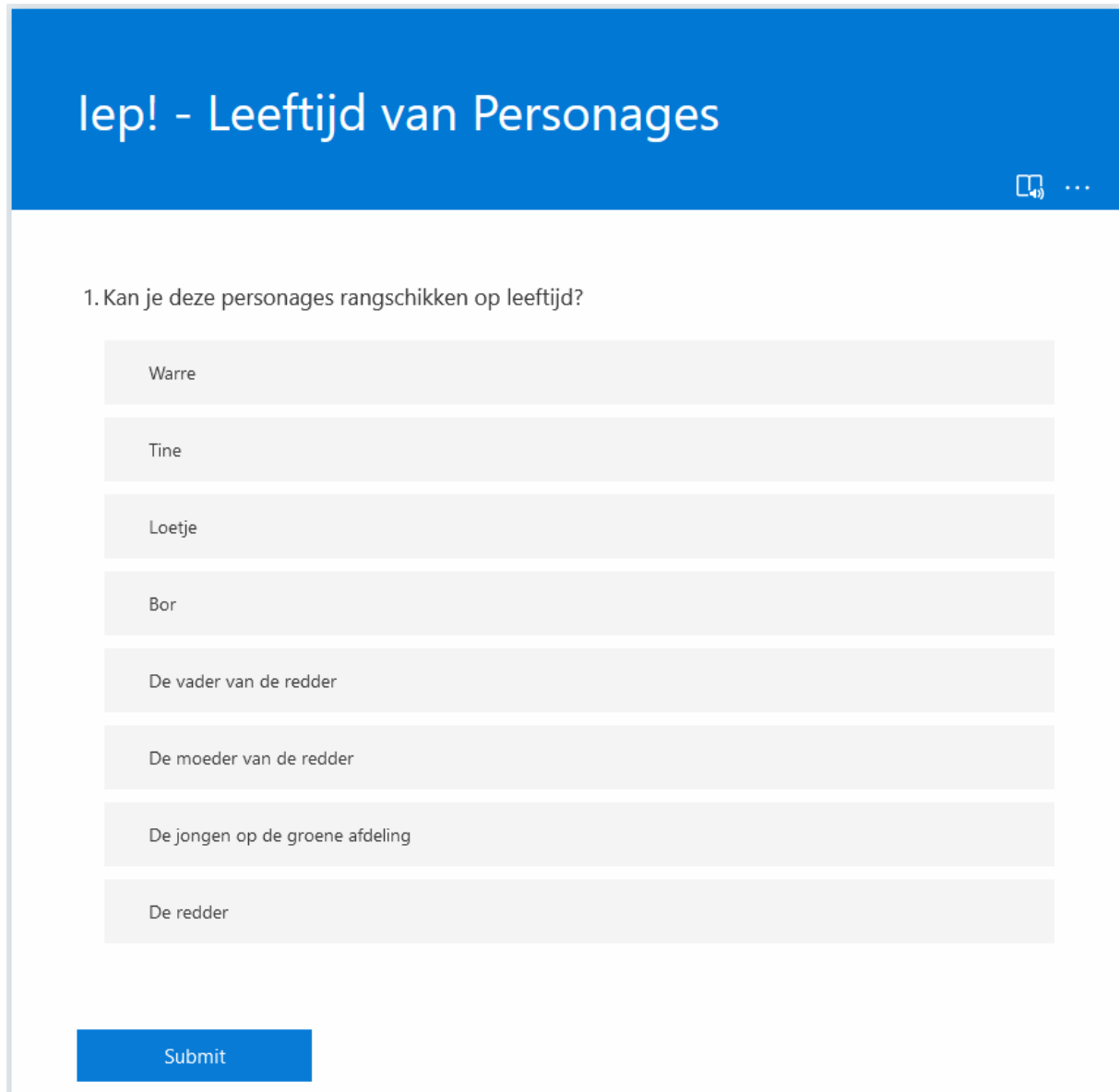
Heb je nog iets toe te voegen aan ons gesprek? Dingen waarover je graag wilt praten die ik niet aangehaald heb?

Zijn er vragen over het onderzoek die je me graag zou willen stellen?

**Uitnodiging voor groepsgesprek**

**Bedank de persoon voor hun deelname.**

## 3.1. Digital form completed by participants before the interview[275]



lep! - Leeftijd van Personages

1. Kan je deze personages rangschikken op leeftijd?

Warre

Tine

Loetje

Bor

De vader van de redder

De moeder van de redder

De jongen op de groene afdeling

De redder

Submit

## 3.2. Fragments and images from *Iep!* used during interviews

Viegeltje en Loetje: p55

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[275] At the time of writing (February 2023) the form can still be accessed via Microsoft forms.
https://forms.office.com/e/gDxVAfiEDJ

Viegeltje ging rechtop zitten. Ze fladderde even om haar evenwicht te vinden.

Toen nam ze een hap adem en zei: 'Ik miet un bieteriemetje mit pindekies.'

Loetje keek haar even aan. Ze begreep het.

Ze zei: 'De pandekaas is ap. Ak hab chacapasta.'

## Viegeltje en Tine: p28

'Je práát,' zei ze, 'wat een geluk. Maar het is nog wel prietpraat hoor, want je zegt de aa niet. Het is niet pindekies maar pindakaas, met een aa. Zeg eens: aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.'

'Ie,' zei Vogeltje, 'ie.'

'Nee, het is aa,' zei Tine, 'aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.'

'Ie,' zei Vogeltje.

'Zeg dan eens ee, eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.'

'Ie,' zei Vogeltje.

'Zeg dan eens oo, ooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.'

'Ie,' zei Vogeltje.

'Zeg dan eens uu, uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu.'

'Uu,' zei Vogeltje.

'Ja, goed zo!' riep Tine, 'heel beleefd. Maar nu aaaaa.'

Vogeltje zei niets meer.

'Kun je je naam zeggen?' vroeg Tine.

Vogeltje zei niets meer.

'Toe nou, één keertje maar: Vogeltje, Vogeltje, Vogeltje. Zeg het dan, anders krijg je geen pindakaas meer.'

'V... V... Viegeltje,' zei Vogeltje.

Die avond kwam Warre weer thuis met zijn vogelboek en zijn verrekijker.

'Ik heb met haar geoefend,' zei Tine. 'Ze kan de aa en de oo niet. Ze kan haar eigen naam niet zeggen. En dat mag niet, Warre, want als je je eigen naam niet kunt zeggen, kun je niet zeggen wie je bent. Ze zei Viegeltje in plaats van Vogeltje. Ze moet maar Viegeltje heten.'

## Loetje en haar vader: p67

Opeens hoorde ze gestommel op de trap. Het was haar lange vader met zijn lange voeten in zijn zware schoenen. Hij kwam er weer aan.

Ze greep Viegeltje beet en duwde haar hardhandig onder het bed.

'En weer daar blijven,' zei ze streng.

'Wat een troep,' zei haar vader zodra hij binnen stond.

'Dat is een nest,' zei Loetje.

'Zul je 't wel opruimen als je klaar bent met spelen?'

'Ik ben nog lang niet klaar.'

'Je weet dat ik nu weg moet,' zei haar vader. 'De oppas komt pas om zeven uur. Dus je bent een paar uurtjes alleen. Krijg ik een zoen?'

Loetje gaf hem een zoen op een prikkerige plek. Ze kreeg er drie terug. Haar vader tilde haar op om beter bij haar gezicht te kunnen.

'Ik broed nog niet zo goed,' zei Loetje.

'Gatverdegatver!' riep haar vader, 'wat is dat voor smerigheid?'

'Van een ei dat ik had gelegd,' zei Loetje. 'Ik had het in het nest gelegd.'

'Stik toch! Stik toch! Dit is mijn beste pak. Nu moet ik het weer schoonmaken. Altijd dat gedoe met jou.'

'Iep,' zei Loetje.

Haar vader keek erg beslommerd. Hij probeerde weer gewoon te kijken, maar dat lukte niet.

'Zeg eens dag tegen papa.'

'Iep,' zei Loetje.

'Zeg eens dag. Ik ben wel een week weg, hoor.'

'Iep.'

'Wil je even gewoon dag zeggen?'

'Iep.'

'Dan niet.'

Haar vader liep weer de gang op met zijn zware schoenen. Loetje hoorde hem onverstaanbare woorden sissen.

Ze ging weer op haar nest zitten. Ergens liep een kraan.

Even later werd de voordeur dichtgetrokken.

'Dag!' riep ze door het dichte dakraam.

Er zat een duif daar. Misschien kon die het horen.

### Loetje en Bor komen de redder, Warre en Tine halen: p129

Ze lieten Viegeltje weer achter en liepen naar de roze afdeling. Voorzichtig klopten ze op de deur van de salon. Een van de mensen van het horstel kwam om het hoekje kijken.

'Wat willen jullie?' vroeg hij.

'We moeten Tine en Warre en de redder spreken,' zei Loetje, 'we hebben een verrassing.'

Even later kwamen ze alledrie de gang op. Ze hadden hun grote sloffen aan.

'Kom mee,' zei Loetje, 'ik heb een grote verrassing.'

'Nee, we komen niet mee,' zei Warre, 'we blijven hier.'

'We horen hier,' zei Tine.

'Ja,' zei de redder, 'en het is heel fijn. We horen allemaal bij elkaar. Jammer, hè, voor jou, dat jij hier niet hoort. Jij hoort ergens anders.'

'Maar we hebben Viegeltje gevonden,' zei Loetje.

Alledrie hielden ze hun mond. Ze dachten na. Het was net of ze allerlei dingen die vooraan in hun hoofd zaten opzij moesten schuiven. Toen kwam er iets tevoorschijn dat helemaal achteraan in een hoekje was weggestopt.

'Vliegeltje!'

Tine kreeg opeens tranen in haar ogen. 'Het was de knussigheid hier,' zei ze, 'alles was zo knussig dat ik nergens anders meer aan dacht.'

'En ik heb helemaal niet meer gedacht dat er misschien ergens een opgegeten meisje lag dat ik had moeten redden,' zei de redder. 'Het was wel gezellig om dat niet te denken.'

### Loetje's droom: p70-72

Ze maakte een warm nest met haar deken en kroop erin weg.

Ze viel al snel in slaap. Het was nog lang niet donker. Thuis zou ze almaar zeggen dat ze nog helemaal niet moe was, helemaal niet, hoe kwamen ze erbij.

En nu viel ze zomaar in slaap.

Ze droomde over haar vader.

En ze droomde over een ei dat ze moest uitbroeden. Ze moest almaar blijven zitten, maar ze wilde weg, leuke dingen doen. Zitten op een ei vond ze helemaal niet leuk.

Ze keek eens goed naar het ei. Het was een plastic ei dat je open kon maken als een doosje, dan kwam er een verrassing uit.

Daar hoefde je niet op te gaan zitten. Dat moest je gewoon openmaken. In het ei zat haar vader. Hij was de verrassing. Hij was piepklein.

'Ik heb het koud,' zei hij.

Ze legde een deken over hem heen. Maar hij verdween helemaal in de deken. Ze kon hem niet terugvinden.

'Papa,' riep ze, 'papa. Ik heb nog niet dag gezegd!'

**De redder en zijn ouders: p93, 141**

'Zo,' zei hij toen dat klaar was. Hij riep zijn oude vader en moeder en zei dat hij een poosje wegging om te zien of er nog wonderen waren in de wereld.

'Best jongen,' zeiden zijn ouders. Ze zagen wel dat hij al niet meer zo pips was.

'Maar pas goed op jezelf. En neem genoeg schone sokken mee. En we zullen extra veel boterhammen voor je smeren, extra lekker dik belegd.'

Ze maakten een stapel boterhammen klaar en flessen vol rode limonade. De redder nam voor alle vier warme slaapzakken en kussens mee. Hij droeg alles. Hij had zo'n dikke bult op zijn rug dat hij er een beetje krom van ging staan.

'Wat is hij sterk, hè,' zeiden zijn ouders trots. [...] De redder lag niet lekker. Het stro prikte in zijn rug en zijn billen. Hij miste zijn oude vader en moeder. Hij wist dat zijn moeder elke dag tussen de rode bloempjes door naar buiten zou kijken, of hij misschien weer eens thuiskwam. Hij dacht aan alle narigheid waar hij nu niet bij was en hij miste het redden. Hij wilde naar huis.

**Kind kunnen lenen: p19-20**

En soms zeiden er mensen: 'Is dat jullie kindje?'

Dan zei Warre: 'We hebben het te leen.'

En dan wilden ze weten waar je een kind kon lenen, want dat leek hun wel handig, dat je er zelf een uitkoos en terugbracht als je er genoeg van had.

**Tine leert Viegeltje eten: p30-35**

Maar Viegeltje scharrelde over de vloer en bukte af en toe om iets naar binnen te zuigen. Een spinnetje dat net zelf iets wilde gaan eten. Een oorwurm die de weg kwijt was.

'Getsie, wat doe je daar?' riep Tine.

'Njiemjiem,' zei Viegeltje.

'Spuug uit. Je eet van de grond. Dat kan niet. Spuug uit.'

Maar Viegeltje had de beestjes al ingeslikt.

Ze vond ze lekker. [...] 'Ja maar Tine,' zei Warre, 'als Viegeltje zo eet, zit ze almaar met haar voeten op tafel. Hoe kunnen we ooit iets deftigs met haar gaan eten in een restaurant als ze almaar met haar voeten op tafel zit?'

'Ze kan toch ook niet met haar gezicht in haar bord liggen slurpen?'

Nee, dat was waar. Eten deed je rechtop aan een tafel. Hoewel het best op andere manieren zou kunnen.

## De oppas en Loetje: p61

De oppas kwam wel vaker logeren als hij een poosje weg moest. Het was een vrouw die studeerde. Ze wilde hogerop komen. Ze maakte eten uit kant-en-klaarpakken. Loetje kreeg dan een volgeschept bord. Ze mocht voor de televisie eten en dat mocht ze van haar vader nooit. Dat vond ze leuk, behalve als er op de televisie zo'n bloederige operatie was van dichtbij. Dan lustte ze opeens niet zoveel meer.

**Pictures from *Iep!***
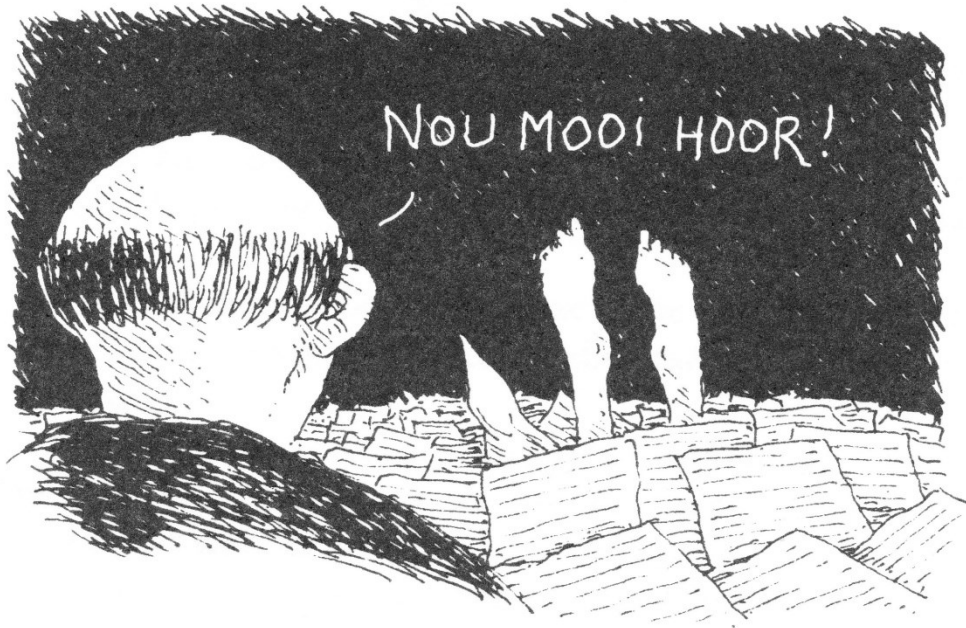
## 4. *Iep!* focus group guide

### Openingsvragen

**Laten we beginnen met ons eerst aan elkaar voor te stellen.**

1. Laten we eerst allemaal onze voornaam en leeftijd eens overlopen. Je mag ook zeker nog wat persoonlijke informatie over je werk of bezigheden toevoegen als je dat wilt.

### Introductievragen (5 min)

2. Zouden jullie nog eens aan de groep willen vertellen wat je van *Iep* vond?
   o Aangenaam om te lezen?
3. Tijdens het interview heb ik jullie laten nadenken over leeftijd in *Iep!.* Wat vonden jullie daar makkelijk aan, en wat was moeilijker?
4. Zijn er vragen die ik tijdens het interview heb gesteld waar je nadien nog over hebt nagedacht?

### Hoofdvragen en specifieke vragen (20 min: 15u25)

Inzicht in (leeftijd van) personages

**Tijdens het interview heb ik met jullie veel personages besproken. Graag zou ik hierover nog enkele vragen stellen:**

5. Jullie hebben erg verschillende leeftijden op Warre en Tine geplakt. Ik zou graag hun leeftijd nog eens bespreken. Zouden jullie eerst even nog willen nadenken over hoe oud jullie dachten dat Warre en Tine waren, en één of twee dingen opschrijven waarom je dat dacht?
   i. Laat ze eerst even nadenken
   o Waarom denken jullie dat er zoveel verschil zat in de ingeschatte leeftijd?
      i. (Tussen de 30 en 70 jaar tijdens de interviews)
      ii. Lijstje van redenen maken.

---

o Quotes:
  i. 14 ICP: Omdat die heel lange wandelingen maken en dat zou bijvoorbeeld oudere mensen minder kunnen.
  ii. 19 ICP: Ze hebben nog de vinnigheid van mensen die jong, jong oud zijn. Dus die net - die eigenlijk net kunnen genieten van hun vrijheid na hun pensioen maar ze zitten niet vast in hun huis zoals de ouders van die redder.

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    iii.  41 ICP: Het lijkt mij zo een koppel dat al heel lang samen is. Ze hebben dan zo hun routines. Hij gaat vogeltjes spotten en zij blijft thuis en ze willen kinderen maar die zijn er nooit gekomen.

    iv.  67 ICP: Ja dat ze de veerkracht hadden om dat toch te plaatsen. Ik denk dat oudere mensen dat die moeilijker over dat verlies kunnen van een kind dus ik dacht ja Tine die hebben nog een leven voor zich.

6. De reactie op Loetje's vader was ook erg interessant. Wat vonden jullie van hem?
   - Wat vonden jullie van de relatie tussen Loetje en haar vader?
   - Iemand vertelde ons dat Loetje misschien graag alleen zit en de vader dat respecteert. Kunnen jullie dat standpunt begrijpen?
   - Enkele deelnemers hadden soms ook begrip voor de vader omdat kinderen soms moeilijk kunnen zijn. Wat denken jullie daarover?
   - Speelde zijn werk een rol in de leeftijd die jullie hem gaven?
   - Ziet hij zijn dochter graag?
7. Meerdere deelnemers verdeelden volwassenen nog in meerdere categorieën. Zouden jullie in Iep de volwassenen nog in verdere groepen onderverdelen? Wie hoort er samen?
   - Personages nog eens opsommen

## Quotes: (10 min - 15u35)

Jullie hebben heel erg veel interessante dingen verteld tijdens het interview. Er zijn twee uitspraken die ik jullie nog eens ga laten lezen, en ik ben gewoon benieuwd wat jullie daar van denken. Ik ga een uitspraak laten zien op het scherm, en dan zullen we even wachten tot iedereen het heeft gelezen.

(Akke 40): Loetje geeft aan dat ze aan het zoeken is naar iets hé. Naar Viegeltje, en Viegeltje is er niet. Allee of toch niet zichtbaar, voor de verpleging zal ik ze dan noemen. Ja en natuurlijk is Viegeltje ook iets speciaal hé. Een meisje met vleugels bestaat niet vanuit de volwassen wereld.

(Fons 19): Ja voor mij kwam dat over alsof die mensen eigenlijk niet zo intelligent waren en ik vond dat dat bij, dat is misschien fout bij mij, maar voor mij kwam dat heel hard boven bij Warre en Tinne. Dat die zo'n beetje naïef over komen, heel goed, goedaardig ook, maar toch nieuwsgierig en daardoor, ook omdat die als eerste geïntroduceerd worden, en die hebben zo de, ja ik weet het niet, de onschuld van mijn grootouders herken ik er ook wel in. De onschuld van oude mensen.

## Back-up vragen

- Er waren uiteenlopende schattingen over de leeftijd van de jongen uit de groene gang, hoe komt dit denken jullie?
  - Ans: 9-11 jaar
    - Rond die leeftijd denken kinderen nog vrijer en hebben minder nood om daar een concrete vorm in te steken.
    - Vindt het jammer dat zij *nooit* meer zo een kunstwerk zal kunnen maken.
  - Moon: begin 20
    - Kan ouder zijn maar wordt "jongen" genoemd.
      - Iemand van 23 kan je nog jongen noemen.
    - Er kolkt veel door elkaar in zijn gedachten, het is nogal een brij.
  - Eline: 15-16 jaar
    - Is zeker niet meer kind. Belangrijkste factor is het besef dat je iets kan maken dat niet volmaakt hoeft te zijn. Dat is iets wat kinderen volgens Eline nog niet weten.
  - Janne: 8-9 jaar
    - Zijn drang om zijn kunstwerk te laten zien, samen met het perspectief van: "ja, ik kan dat niet, ik kan dat niet" [sic] maakt hem voor Janne nog een jong kind.
  - Aniek: een puber
    - Ligt met zichzelf in de knoop.
- Denken jullie dat de jongen in de groene gang op vlak van persoonlijkheid dichter bij Bor staat of bij de redder?
- Denken jullie dat Warre dichter staat bij Viegeltje of bij de vader van Loetje op vlak van persoonlijkheid?
- Kunnen jullie nog eens vertellen wie er volgens jullie ouder is, de vader van Loetje, of Warre en Tine? Ik ga jullie eerst weer even geven om na te denken, en graag zou ik vragen dat jullie de sleutelwoorden opschrijven die voor jullie belangrijk zijn om die vraag te beantwoorden.
- Zouden jullie zeggen dat Warre, Tine de redder en Loetje vrienden worden? Waarom? Zijn vriendschappen tussen volwassenen en kinderen in dit boek anders dan vriendschappen tussen kinderen?

## Algemenere ervaring van leeftijd in het boek: (20 min – 15u55)

**Ik zou ook graag nog enkele vragen willen stellen over hoe jullie eigen leeftijd de beleving van het boek heeft beïnvloed.**

8. Denken jullie dat hoe oud je bent bepaalt hoe oud je de personages van *Iep* inschat?

- o **Vraag eerst aan Louise**: Denk je dat er stukken van het verhaal zijn waar de oudere lezers anders naar gaan kijken dan jij? (geef ze zeker even tijd om na te denken)
- o Hebben jullie bepaalde ervaringen gehad in jullie leven die jullie hebben geholpen om het boek te begrijpen? Ervaringen die andere mensen misschien niet hebben?
- o Vinden jullie het moeilijker om personages te begrijpen als je zelf niemand kent van die leeftijd?
  - o Kan literatuur helpen om mensen van andere leeftijden beter te begrijpen?
9. Jullie gebruikten verschillende ideeën over leeftijd om de personages verschillende leeftijden te geven. Er zijn een paar ideeën bij die ik graag eens in groep zou willen bespreken.
    - ▪ Fantasie:
      - Hoe hebben jullie zelf die fantasie ervaren?
      - Heeft jullie leeftijd daar veel mee te maken?
      - Zijn er volwassen personages met fantasie in Iep?
      - Ervaren jullie dat jullie nog veel fantasie hebben?
      - Is fantasie belangrijk om Iep te begrijpen? Is dat dan gebonden aan leeftijd eventueel?
    - ▪ **Zorg dragen**
    - ▪ Routine bij ouderen
10. Wat vonden jullie van de manier waarop Joke van Leeuwen de volwassen personages schrijft in het boek?
    - o Denken jullie dat lezers van verschillende leeftijden hierdoor anders naar volwassenheid kijken?
11. Vinden jullie dat de personages van jullie leeftijd goed afgebeeld werden?
12. Ik heb vaak gevraagd naar verschillen tussen personages van verschillende leeftijden, maar zijn er ook manieren waarop personages van verschillende leeftijden in het boek op elkaar lijken?
    - o **Geef ze zeker tijd om na te denken hier**

Extra

13. Heeft iemand het boek herlezen?
    - o Zijn er nieuwe dingen je opgevallen na ons interview?

## Sluitingsvragen (5 min)

14. Heeft een andere deelnemer in dit gesprek iets verteld waar je zelf niet aan gedacht zou hebben? Of waar je nog wat dieper op wilt ingaan?
    - o Personages

     o Ideeën over leeftijd

15. Hebben jullie vragen die je nog aan de groep wilt stellen?
16. Als je één boodschap kon meegeven aan alle schrijvers van kinderboeken, over de manier waarop ze leeftijd weergeven. Wat zou je dan zeggen?

## Post-discussie

Uitleg 2<sup>de</sup> interviews

     o Ideeën over leeftijd

15. Hebben jullie vragen die je nog aan de groep wilt stellen?
16. Als je één boodschap kon meegeven aan alle schrijvers van kinderboeken, over de manier waarop ze leeftijd weergeven. Wat zou je dan zeggen?

## Post-discussie

Uitleg 2$^{de}$ interviews

## 5. *Voor altijd samen, amen* interview guide

| Fase 1: kennismaking | 10 min |
|---|---|
| **Doel**: Eva Magnusson en Jeanne Marecek raden in hun boek over kwalitatieve interviews aan om een opwarmgesprek te laten plaatsvinden voor de aanvang van het echte interview. Ze benadrukken dat deze vragen deels of volledig niet gerelateerd mogen zijn aan het echte onderzoek (56; zie ook King en Horrock 56). <br><br> Om hier rekening mee te houden wil ik eerst een kort kennismakingsgesprek houden, gericht op het benadrukken dat er geen foute antwoorden zijn en het creëren van een ontspannen sfeer. | |

- De onderzoeker stelt zich kort voor.
  - o Mijn naam is Leander Duthoy, ik ben doctoraatsstudent aan het Constructing Age For Young Readers project, onder toezicht van professor Vanessa Joosen. Dit is het tweede jaar van mijn onderzoek, dat in totaal 4 jaar zal duren.
  - o De andere persoon die je in dit gesprek ziet is professor Vanessa Joosen, zij beheert het hele project en zal dus vandaag meeluisteren met dit interview.
- Hoe wilt u graag aangesproken worden voor dit interview?

<div align="center" style="color:red">[BEGIN OPNAME]</div>

**Vragen van:**
- Naam
- Geboortedatum

**Korte toelichting onderzoek:**
- Ons onderzoeksproject bestudeert leeftijd in kinderliteratuur. Mijn specifiek deel van het onderzoek kijkt naar **hoe de leeftijd van de echte lezer het begrip en de interpretatie van leeftijd in kinderliteratuur beïnvloedt.** Daarom ben ik in dit interview voornamelijk benieuwd naar hoe jij kijkt naar de leeftijd van de personages in dit verhaal en naar leeftijd in het algemeen.
- Bespreking van ethische documenten:
  - o Informatiebrief:
  - o Consent form
  - o Bespreek zeker ook mondeling de belangrijkste informatie
    - o **Confidentialiteit**: Uw identiteit en uw deelname aan deze studie worden strikt vertrouwelijk behandeld en wij volgen hierbij de Europese wetgeving (de Algemene Verordening Gegevensbescherming van 25 mei 2018). U zult niet bij naam of op een andere herkenbare wijze geïdentificeerd worden in dossiers, resultaten of publicaties in verband met de studie.

> - **Vrijwillig stoppen**: U neemt geheel vrijwillig deel aan deze studie en u hebt het recht te weigeren eraan deel te nemen. U heeft steeds de mogelijkheid om al dan niet aan deze studie deel te nemen of om uw deelname aan de studie stop te zetten.
> - …

**Vragen van:**
- KEUZE PSEUDONIEM

**Korte toelichting interview:**
- Het is een informeel, rustig gesprek. Maak je zeker comfortabel neem nog iets om te drinken als je dat wilt.
- Er zijn **geen foute antwoorden**, je mag echt zeggen wat je wilt.
- **Neen** is een volledig antwoord, voel je niet geforceerd om iets te antwoorden omdat ik een vraag stel. Als je geen antwoord hebt is dat het juiste antwoord.
- Je mag gerust even **nadenken voor je antwoord**, er is geen haast. Ik ga je af en toe ook extra tijd geven om even na te denken voor je antwoord.
- Je mag altijd nog even **terugkomen op een vorige vraag**, ook al zijn we al over iets anders aan het praten.
- Soms kan het zijn dat de interviewer **vraagt voor verduidelijking**, dat is zeker niet het teken dat je antwoord slecht was, maar eerder dat we het erg interessant vonden en graag meer informatie willen.
- <span style="color:red">**Stiltes** zijn ok. Neem gerust je tijd om na te denken.</span>
- **Vraag om het boek erbij te nemen.**
- Heb jij nog vragen over de vormgeving van het interview voor we beginnen? Het interview zal **ongeveer een uur duren.**

**Introductie-gesprek over leeftijd en kinderliteratuur:**
- Lees je veel? Hoeveel boeken ongeveer per maand?
- Lees je soms kinderboeken?/ Lees je soms boeken die voor oudere lezers bedoeld zijn?
  - Waarom wel/niet?
  - **Indien niet**: Wanneer en waarom ben je daar mee gestopt? Is dat langzaamaan gebeurd of eerder plots?
- Ik zou je eens willen vragen om na te denken hoe jij mensen in leeftijdsgroepen onderverdeelt. Laten we zeggen van 0 – 100 jaar, welke groepen maak jij daar in van leeftijden die samen horen?
  - Bv: Baby's
  - In welke leeftijdsgroep zou je jezelf plaatsen?

| | |
|---|---|
| ▪ Waarom?<br>- Wat vind jij zoal leuk aan jouw leeftijd?<br>- En zijn er ook nadelen aan jouw leeftijd? | |
| Fase 2: Algemene beleving van boek/kinderliteratuur | 15 min |
| **Doel: E**erste benadering van het onderwerp leeftijd. In deze fase werken we vanuit de lezer naar het boek. M.a.w., alle concrete elementen uit het boek worden aangehaald door de deelnemer zelf. | |

Indrukken over personages en hun leeftijden:

Link formulier

Uitspraken: akkoord/niet akkoord

*Zoek op voorhand naar de meest interessante reacties:*

- [GEEF DENKTIJD] Polleke is in dit boek elf jaar, zijn deze uitspraken voor jou een goed voorbeeld van hoe iemand van elf nadenkt over mensen van verschillende leeftijden?
    - *Oudere lezer*: Toen jij elf was, kwam jouw blik op mensen van andere leeftijden hiermee overeen?
        - Zijn er uitspraken van Polleke waar je van denkt dat je er nu anders naar kijkt vergeleken met toen je jonger was?
    - *Jongere lezer:* Jij bent ongeveer even oud als Polleke, heb jij ook wel eens zoiets gedacht?
        - Wat denk jij dat volwassenen hiervan denken?
        - Waarom denk je dat/ Hoe weet je dat?

Kan je eens vertellen waarom je bij uitspraak x het (niet) eens was met Polleke?

    - Waarop baseer je je op om te zeggen dat je (niet) akkoord gaat met wat Polleke hier vertelt?
        - Ben je in boeken en films/via je vrienden of familie/bij jezelf al dingen tegenkomen die deze uitspraken bevestigen/tegenspreken?
- Waren er uitspraken waarvan je vond dat ze op jou van toepassing waren?

Gekozen uitspraak:

- Waarom viel deze uitspraak voor jou op?
- Je had ook aangegeven dat je bij deze uitspraak het (niet) eens was met Polleke. Waarom?

- Denk je dat als mensen van andere leeftijd deze uitspraak van Polleke zouden lezen, dat ze er dan anders naar gaan kijken dan jij?

Persoonlijke links met personages:

- Wat was je **favoriet** personage?
  - o Waarom?
  - o Gedraagt dat personage zich zoals jij zou verwachten dat iemand van die leeftijd zich gedraagt? Op welke manier?
  - o Denk je dat de leeftijd van het personage er iets mee te maken heeft waarom je dat personage leuker vindt dan andere personages?
- Was er een personage dat je helemaal niet leuk vond?
  - o Waarom?
  - o Gedraagt dat personage zich zoals jij zou verwachten dat iemand van die leeftijd zich gedraagt?
  - o Zou het gedrag van het personage je gestoord hebben als hij/zij [leeftijd x] of [leeftijd y] was?
  - o Denk je dat jouw leeftijd of de leeftijd van het personage een invloed heeft op het feit dat je ze minder leuk vindt?
- Welk personage **lijkt het meeste** op jou?
  - o Voelde je je verbonden met dat personage? Waarom wel/niet?
  - o Waren er andere personages waar je je verbonden mee voelde?
  - o Heb je aan jouw leeftijd en de leeftijd van het personage gedacht om hier een antwoord op te geven?


- Waren er stukken van het boek die herkenbaar waren voor jou?
  - o Waarom is dat stuk herkenbaar voor jou, heb jij of mensen die je kent ook ooit al zoiets meegemaakt?
  - o Waren er personages die je deden denken aan mensen die je zelf kent?
    - ▪ Op welke manier?


Geschiktheid voor kinderen:

- Denk je dat het een geschikt/goed boek is voor kinderen? Waarom wel of niet?
- Inpikken op wat lezers aanhalen als "geschikt voor kinderen"
  - o (Bv: bij vermelden van "fantasie")
    - ▪ Heb jij nog veel fantasie?
    - ▪ Was dat belangrijk voor jou om het boek te begrijpen?
- Is het boek ook geschikt/goed voor volwassenen?
- Denk je dat kinderen iets uit het verhaal kunnen leren?
- Denk je dat volwassenen iets uit het verhaal kunnen leren?

| | |
|---|---|
| o Denk je dat dat een goede les is om te leren? | |
| Fase 3: Concretere bespreking van personages | 15 min |
| **Doel**: In de vorige fase bracht de deelnemer zelf specifieke elementen uit het boek aan. In fase 2 brengt de interviewer deze aan, en wordt aan de deelnemer gevraagd om een mening/reactie daarop te geven. Hierbij werken we dus vanuit het boek naar de lezer. | |
| Karakterisering/constructie van leeftijd:<br><br>*Algemeen:*<br><br>- Vind je dat het boek een goed beeld geeft van de leefwereld van kinderen?<br><br>*Polleke:*<br><br>- Kan je het personage Polleke eens samenvatten in 3 woorden?<br>     o Kan je verduidelijken waarom je die woorden kiest?<br>         ▪ INPIKKEN OP WOORDEN: wat betekent dat woord voor jou? Waarom link je dat aan Polleke?<br>     o Heeft jouw keuze voor die woorden te maken met Polleke's leeftijd?<br>     o Is er één of meerdere van die woorden die je ook zou gebruiken om een ouder personage te beschrijven?<br>         ▪ Op welke manier lijken ze dan op elkaar?<br>- We leren niet direct dat Polleke 11 jaar is, verbaasde je dat toen je het las?<br>     o Vind je dat het personage Polleke een geloofwaardig beeld geeft van een elfjarig iemand? Kan je een voorbeeld geven van iets dat haar wel/niet geloofwaardig maakte voor jou?<br>     o Zou Polleke ook ouder of jonger kunnen zijn zonder dat het verhaal verandert?<br>     o Op een bepaald punt zegt Polleke: "Moet je je voorstellen dat je op je elfde door je moeder naar school wordt gebracht!"<br>         ▪ Is dat een uitspraak die jij begrijpt? Waarom stoort Polleke zich hier eigenlijk aan?<br>         ▪ Denk je dat dit Polleke zal blijven storen? Of zal ze dit minder erg vinden als ze ouder wordt?<br>         ▪ Zou het jou storen als je moeder je ergens naartoe brengt? Waarom (niet)?<br>     o Wat vind je van Polleke's reactie op de relatie tussen haar moeder en de meester?<br>         ▪ Waarom reageert ze zo? Begrijp je die reactie?<br>         ▪ Is dat een typische reactie voor iemand van elf jaar?<br>     o Vind je dat Polleke verandert in de loop van het verhaal?<br>         ▪ Heeft dat met haar leeftijd te maken volgens jou? | |

*Wouter:*

- Hoe oud denk je dat Wouter is? Wat maakt Wouter zo oud?
    - Zijn er nog dingen waar je aan denkt?
    - In welke leeftijdsgroep plaats jij Wouter?
    - Waarom is hij niet [andere leeftijd] volgens jou?
    - Is [age norm] dan iets wat jij vaak ziet bij [leeftijdsgroep]?
        - Zie je dat ook bij andere personages in het boek?
    - Op een bepaald punt denkt Polleke: "Daar had ik nog nooit van gehoord. Een man van zijn leeftijd. Niet getrouwd!" Heeft die uitspraak jouw kijk op de leeftijd van Wouter veranderd?
        - Dacht jij tijdens het lezen soms aan dit soort opmerkingen? Over dat Wouter op zijn leeftijd iets wel of niet zou moeten doen of gedaan hebben?

*Spiek:*

- Hoe oud denk je dat Spiek is?
    - Waarom is hij niet x of y jaar oud?

*Grootouders:*

- Hoe oud denk je dat de grootouders van Polleke ongeveer zijn?
    - Waaraan merk je dat?
- Vind je ze geloofwaardig als oudere personen? Zijn oudere mensen echt zo?
    - Waarom?
- Jongere lezers: Verwacht je dat je zelf zo zal zijn als je ouder wordt?
- Oudere lezers: Heb je voeling met de manier waarop deze oudere personages worden afgebeeld? Komt dit overeen met jouw ervaring van jouw leeftijd?
- Het uiterlijk van de grootouders wordt in het boek niet echt beschreven, hoe denk jij dat ze eruit zien?
- Bespreken mini-fragment (hoofdstuk 12):

> 'Ik kon hem nergens vinden,' zei ik. 'Ik heb het hele winkelcentrum afgezocht. En gevraagd bij van die mannen.'
>
> 'Wat voor mannen?' vroeg opa.
>
> 'Die daar zijn,' zei ik. Ik bedoelde van die mannen die daar zitten te drinken en te roken. Zwervers en junks. Maar dat zei ik natuurlijk niet tegen opa, want die zou daar maar van schrikken.

- Wat vind je van dat fragment?
- Waarom denkt Polleke dat opa daar van zou schrikken?
- Denk jij dat opa daar ook echt van zou schrikken?
- Zou jij schrikken als je opa was en Polleke het tegen jou zou zeggen?

- Denk je dat Polleke het sneller zou vertellen tegen [personages] en dat zij anders zouden reageren? Link je dat aan hun leeftijd?
  - Mama/Wouter
  - Mimoen/Caro

## (Inter)generationele verschillen en interacties:

Het boek beeldt een aantal relaties/vriendschappen uit tussen mensen van verschillende leeftijden. Ik zou eens graag willen bespreken wat jij daarvan vond.

- Wat vind je van de relatie van Polleke en Mimoen?
  - Past dit voor hun leeftijd?
  - Denk je dat Mimoen ouder of jonger is dan Polleke?
    - Heeft jouw blik hierop te maken met dat Mimoen een jongen is en Polleke een meisje?
  - Snap je de reactie van de moeder van Mimoen op hun vriendschap?
- Wat vind je van de relatie tussen Wouter en Tina?
  - Zouden Wouter en Tina met elkaar kunnen samen zijn als één van de twee ouder of jonger was?
    - Heeft jouw blik hierop te maken met dat Wouter een man is en Tina een vrouw?
  - Zie jij een toekomst voor Wouter en Tina?
- Vind je dat de relatie tussen Polleke en Mimoen en Wouter en Tina te vergelijken zijn met elkaar?
- Wat denk je over de manier waarop de volwassenen en de kinderen met elkaar omgaan in dit boek?
  - Wat vind je van de band tussen Wouter en Polleke?
    - Valt het op dat er een leeftijdsverschil is tussen Polleke en Wouter?
  - Kan je de relatie tussen Polleke en haar mama eens beschrijven?
    - Is er iets wat je minder goed vindt aan hun relatie?
  - Kan je de relatie tussen Polleke en haar grootouders eens beschrijven?
    - Is er iets wat je minder goed vindt aan hun relatie?
  - Zijn er volgens jou verschillen in de relatie tussen Polleke en haar mama en Polleke en haar grootouders?
    - Heeft dit met de leeftijd van mama of opa en oma te maken?
- Wie denk jij dat Polleke beter begrijpt, haar mama, haar grootouders of Mimoen?

## Motivatie van personages:

- Had je het gevoel dat je begreep waarom de personages deden wat ze deden? Of snapte je sommige dingen niet?

| | |
|---|---|
| - Waarom wil Wouter/de meester Polleke helpen zoeken naar haar vader?<br>　　o Waarom zegt Polleke nee?<br>- Waarom denk je dat de schrijver Polleke's vader zo heeft geschreven?<br>- Wat voor rol speelt de vader in het boek? | |

| | |
|---|---|
| Fase 4: Lezen en bespreken van fragmenten | 15 min |

**Doel:** Na het lezen van een volledig boek vergeet men soms kleine interessante momenten uit het verhaal. Daarom heb ik enkele korte fragmenten en prenten geselecteerd die samen gelezen en besproken worden. Dit is ook de meest concrete fase uit het interview waarbij specifieke elementen uit *Voor altijd samen, amen* worden uitgelicht.

**Fragment 1: Wouters moeder (p30-31)**
- Waarom denk je dat Polleke's moeder een "gevaarlijke blik" in haar ogen kreeg?
- Wat denk je dat Polleke's moeder vindt van Wouters relatie met zijn moeder?
- Wat vind jij van Wouters band met zijn moeder?

**Fragment 2: Polleke en haar grootouders (p51-52)**
- Waarom denk je dat er even spanning is tussen Polleke en haar oma?
- Begrijp je waarom oma zo reageert?
- Begrijp je Polleke's reactie?
- Ga je akkoord met opa dat Polleke misschien gelijk kan hebben?

**Fragment 3: de ruzie (p77-79)**
- Waar denk jij dat de ruzie over ging?
　　o Wat zou Wouter gezegd kunnen hebben dat de ruzie startte?
- Waarom is Polleke zo boos dat er ruzie wordt gemaakt?
- Wie denk je dat er "gelijk" heeft in de ruzie?
- Is dit volgens jou een probleem dat Wouter en Tina kunnen oplossen of gaan ze uiteen gaan?
- Hoe vind je dat de personages met de ruzie omgaan?

**Fragment 4: Polleke en Spiek (p90-91)**
- Wat vind je van de interactie tussen Polleke en Spiek hier?
- Ze zijn het even niet eens met elkaar. Wie vind je dat er "gelijk" heeft?
　　o Heb je hier begrip voor de papa?
- Waarom wil Spiek niet naar oma en opa gaan?
- Welke gevoelens brengt deze scène bij je op?
　　o Blij, boos, droevig,…
- Wat vind je ervan dat Polleke zegt: "Ik bleef niét thuis, wat Spiek ook zou zeggen."
- Denk je dat Polleke's band met haar vader anders zou zijn als hun leeftijden anders waren?

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">

Extra vragen:
- Heb je het gevoel dat de kinderboeken die je hebt gelezen een invloed hebben gehad op wie je bent als persoon?
- Er zijn ook opvattingen in de literatuur die zeggen dat cultuur invloed heeft op hoe wij denken over leeftijd. Hoe denk jij daarover?
- In jouw kijk op de leeftijd van die personages, heb je het gevoel dat je eerder naar de tekst kijkt, of dat je ook veel aan je eigen ervaringen moet denken?
- Er zijn nog wel wat uitspraken over leeftijd in het boek die we niet besproken hebben.
  - o Focus op uitspraken waarbij deelnemer "niet akkoord" had aangegeven?

</td></tr>
<tr><td>Fase 5: Afronding</td><td>5 min</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">

Heb je nog iets toe te voegen aan ons gesprek? Dingen waarover je graag wilt praten die ik niet aangehaald heb?

Zijn er vragen over het onderzoek die je me graag zou willen stellen?
- **Deelnemen aan focusgroep gesprekken en 2de interviews.**
- **Zal eventueel "in het echt" plaatsvinden.**

**Bedank de persoon voor hun deelname.**

</td></tr>
</table>

## 5.1. Digital form completed by participants before the interview

1. Het boek bevat veel uitspraken over leeftijd. Duid hieronder aan met welke uitspraken je eerder akkoord gaat of begrijpt, en welke niet. *

| | Eerder akkoord/dit begrijp ik | Eerder niet akkoord/dit begrijp ik niet | Geen mening |
|---|---|---|---|
| Wij moeten uit elkaar, want in de achtste groep zijn we al bijna grote mensen. Grote mensen houden ervan dat er dingen niet mogen | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| We wandelen dus. Je loopt, je komt nergens en dan loop je weer terug. Dat is wandelen. Ik vind er niks aan, maar grote mensen zijn er gek op. | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Ik ben pas elf jaar weet je. Ik word daar zo moe van! Ik kan niet zomaar doen wat ik wil. | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Wat wist mamma van het leven buiten? Ik leefde daar, op straat en op het schoolplein. Ik moest het gescheld verdragen, zij niet. | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Later, als je zo groot bent als ik, dan komen de verdrietige dingen. Nu ben je nog maar een klein, blij kalfje. | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Waarom begrijpen grote mensen nooit wat wel en wat niet kan? Hebben ze dan geen fatsoen in hun donder? | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Ik viel zowat van me stoel van verbazing. Daar had ik nog nooit van gehoord. Een man van zijn leeftijd. Niet getrouwd! | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Grote mensen zijn zooo kinderachtig! Ze zeggen zooo vaak nee tegen mij. Zeg ík een keer nee, dan krijg je zo'n gezicht . | ○ | ○ | ○ |

2. Het boek bevat veel uitspraken over leeftijd. Kies hieronder één uitspraak die jij graag wilt bespreken tijdens het interview. De reden waarom mag je zelf bepalen. *

- ☐ Grote mensen houden ervan dat er dingen niet mogen

- ☐ Ik werd als een klein kind de school in gesleurd.

- ☐ We stonden op. We liepen een eind nergens heen en liepen weer terug. Wandelen heet dat. Grote mensen zijn er gek op

- ☐ Ik ben pas elf jaar weet je. Ik word daar zo moe van! Ik kan niet zomaar doen wat ik wil.

- ☐ Wat wist mamma van het leven buiten? Ik leefde daar, op straat en op het schoolplein. Ik moest het gescheld verdragen, zij niet.

- ☐ Later, als je zo groot bent als ik, dan komen de verdrietige dingen. Nu ben je nog maar een klein, blij kalfje

- ☐ Waarom begrijpen grote mensen nooit wat wel en wat niet kan? Hebben ze dan geen fatsoen in hun donder?

- ☐ Ik viel zowat van me stoel van verbazing. Daar had ik nog nooit van gehoord. Een man van zijn leeftijd. Niet getrouwd!

- ☐ Vorige week was er ook iets raars met een jongen. Hij was dertien of veertien of zo. Wilde de hele tijd Caro zoenen. Dat was me wat hoor. Hij maar zeuren: 'Hé, geef me es een zoen lekker stuk.'

- ☐ Grote mensen zijn zooo kinderachtig! Ze zeggen zooo vaak nee tegen mij. Zeg ík een keer nee, dan krijg je zo'n gezicht .

3. Rangschik onderstaande personages op basis van leeftijd. *

Mimoen

Caro

Opa

Oma

Spiek/Gerrit

Tina

Wouter/meester

Sina

Polleke

## 5.2. Fragments and images from *Voor altijd samen, amen* used during interviews

### Fragment 1: Wouters moeder (p30-31)

De meester en Caro zaten stilletjes op hun stoelen. 'Zo,' zei mijn moeder toen ze binnenkwam. 'Opgeruimd staat netjes. Die krijgt geen cent meer van me, nooit van ze leven. Blijf je eten Wouter?'

Wouter!

Ik voelde me misselijk worden.

'Andere keer graag,' zei de meester. 'Ik eet bij mijn moeder.'

'O,' zei mijn moeder.

De witte envelop lag op tafel. Hoe kreeg ik die ongemerkt te pakken? Caro zat er brutaal naar te staren alsof ie van háár was. Zo kijkt ze altijd trouwens. Alsof alles op de wereld van háár is. Nou deze envelop was toevallig niet van háár.

'Heeft je moeder geen telefoon?' vroeg mijn moeder.

Hilletje probeerde Ernie (zo'n stoffen poppetje) in de videorecorder te proppen en dat lukte. Helemaal naar binnen.

'Niet doen!' riep Caro. Ze haalde een kurkentrekker uit de keuken en probeerde Ernie er weer uit te trekken. Ik griste snel de envelop van tafel. Niemand zag het.

'Jawel,' zei de meester. 'Maar ze rekent op me. Ik eet drie keer per week bij d'r.'

'O,' zei mijn moeder. Ze keek me even aan. Ze had een gevaarlijke blik in haar ogen. 'Je hebt zeker een mooie band met je moeder?' vroeg ze liefjes.

### Fragment 2: Polleke en haar grootouders (p51-52)

'Wij moeten proberen gewoon door te leven,' zei opa. 'Gerrit leeft zíjn leven en wij het onze.'

'Spiek is een dichter,' zei ik, 'daar komt het van.'

'Onzin,' zei oma. 'Jij bent een dichter, want jij maakt gedichten. Hij maakt alleen maar brokken.'

'Marie...' zei opa.

Ik keek oma geschrokken aan. Ik balde mijn vuisten. Ik had zin om kwaad te worden, maar toen zag ik oma's gezicht. Ze keek zooo verdrietig en zooo moe.

'Je bent nu elf jaar,' zei ze. 'Het is uit met de droom. Gerrit is geen dichter en zal ook nooit een dichter worden.'

'Ik ben niks van me geloof,' zei ik, 'maar ik geloof dat pappa een dichter is.'

'Marie...' zei opa. 'Nou niks terugzeggen. Polleke kan net zo goed nadenken als wij. Dus misschien heeft ze gelijk.'

Toen zeiden we niks meer. Het was niet gezellig aan tafel, want we moesten de hele tijd aan Spiek denken.

### Fragment 3: de ruzie (p77-79)

Toen ik zondagavond thuiskwam, hoorde ik mijn moeder schreeuwen.

'Daar heb jij niks mee te maken. Dat bepaal ik altijd zelf nog wel.'

Daarna de meester: 'Ik zeg alleen maar dat het ook anders kan.'

'Maar je bedoelt dat het anders móét!' schreeuwde mijn moeder. 'Je weet alles altijd beter, schoolfrik!'

En zo ging het geschreeuw maar door. Ik kneep mijn handen tot vuisten. Ik werd zooo ontzettend kwaad. Ze wisten dat ik om acht uur thuiskwam. En wat deden ze? Ruziemaken om acht uur. Ik stampte naar binnen, gooide mijn rugzak op de grond en schreeuwde: 'Koppen dicht!'

Ze keken me aan alsof ik van de maan kwam.

'Dat kan wel wat minder Polleke,' zei de meester.

'Jij ook,' riep ik buiten adem van kwaadheid. 'Jij houdt ook je mond. Ik heb heel leuke dingen beleefd, maar ik vertel niks, want ik wil niks met jullie te maken hebben.'

Ik draaide me om, want ik wilde naar boven.

'Wacht Polleke,' zei mamma, 'wacht. Kom meid, kom hier.' Ze hield haar armen naar me open.

Ik liep naar haar toe. Ze trok me naar zich toe en kuste me. Ze rook naar wijn en dat vind ik niet lekker. 'Je ruikt naar boerderij,' zei ze. 'Hoe was 't?'

Ik trok me los. 'Leuk,' zei ik. Ik had geen zin om iets te vertellen.

'We hadden een beetje ruzie,' zei de meester.

'Een beetje?' riep ik. 'Ik kon het op straat al horen!'

'Niet zo schreeuwen,' zei de meester.

Jawel, 'niet zo schreeuwen,' zei die. Had je hem zelf moeten horen. 'Jij bent hier de meester niet,' zei ik zacht. 'Op school ben je de meester. Hier niet. Hier ben je Wouter. En je bent me vader ook niet. Ik woon hier. Jij niet. Ik schreeuw hier. Jij niet!'

'Ja, nou is het afgelopen, wijsneus!' schreeuwde mijn moeder tegen de meester. 'Nou wegwezen en gauw!'

'Ma-am!' probeerde ik.

Maar mijn moeder stond op en wees naar de deur.

'Oké, oké,' zei de meester. 'Ik ga al.' Hij stond op. 'Er valt met jou toch niet redelijk te praten.'

'Kalm nou mam,' zei ik, want het ging helemaal mis.

'Nee, nou even niet,' riep mijn moeder. 'Ik heb heel even geen zin in kalm. Meneer denkt zich met mij en mijn kind te kunnen bemoeien. Meneer gaat er nu uit.'

De meester ging. Zijn gezicht was bleek. De buitendeur viel hard in het slot.

## Fragment 4: Polleke en Spiek (p90-91)

'Ik moet nog veel regelen,' zei Spiek. 'Kan jij morgen Hilletje, Elke en Dirk ophalen? Om deze tijd ongeveer? Dan ontmoeten we elkaar bij jou in de straat.'

'Nee,' zei ik, 'morgen kan niet. Morgen ga ik naar opa en oma.'

'Tjee,' zei Spiek. 'Ik ben net terug. Kan dat niet één dagje wachten?'

Soms ben ik opeens alle woorden kwijt. Ik zoek in mijn hoofd, maar ik vind er geen één. Het is een soort woestijn met alleen maar zand en geen enkel plantje.

Ik dacht aan de boerderij van opa en oma. Aan Polleke het kalf. Aan Greet en aan God. En plotseling waren er weer woorden.

Laat Spiek asjeblieft begrijpen wat ik ga zeggen. Amen.

'Pappa,' zei ik. 'Ik heb héél veel dagen op jou gewacht. Ik ga morgen naar opa en oma.'

Ik keek naar zijn gezicht en zag dat hij verdrietig was. Dat was een naar gevoel, maar ik wist héél zeker dat ik morgen naar opa en oma ging. Ik bleef níét thuis, wat Spiek ook zou zeggen.

'Jij houdt erg veel van opa en oma hè?' zei Spiek.

'Ja,' zei ik.

'Vind je 't niet vervelend, dat gedoe met God en zo?' vroeg hij.

'Helemaal niet. Ik kan heel goed bidden. Jij zou bijvoorbeeld ook naar oma en opa toe kunnen gaan en dan...'

'Nee,' zei Spiek. 'Ik moet nog een hoop doen.'

'O,' zei ik.

'Oké,' zei Spiek. Hij pakte me beet en wilde me optillen. Halverwege begonnen zijn armen te trillen. Hij kreunde. Hij zette me neer. 'Sjonge,' zei hij, 'wat ben jij zwaar geworden!' Er stonden druppeltjes op zijn voorhoofd. 'Zie ik je dan maandag?' Hij boog voorover en kuste me op mijn neus.

'Goed,' zei ik.

Ik zwaaide hem na tot hij de straat uit was. Toen pas zag ik dat hij mager was geworden.

# 6. *Voor altijd samen, amen* focus group guide

## Openingsvragen (5 min)

**Laten we beginnen met ons aan elkaar voor te stellen.**

1. Ik denk dat het leuk is om te beginnen met ons even aan elkaar voor te stellen. Willen jullie misschien even jullie voornaam zeggen en hoe oud je bent. Als je wilt mag je ook wat vertellen over je werk of de dingen waar je mee bezig bent.

**Transitievraag:**

2. Tijdens het interview heb ik jullie laten nadenken over leeftijd in *Voor altijd samen, amen.* Wat vonden jullie daar makkelijk aan, en wat was moeilijker?

## Hoofdvragen en specifieke vragen (20 min: 19u25)

## Inzicht in (leeftijd van) personages

3. Ik zou eerst even willen stilstaan bij jullie leeservaring van boeken in het algemeen. Als jullie een boek lezen, en er wordt voor een personage geen leeftijd gegeven, wat zijn dan de belangrijkste dingen waar je op let om daar voor jezelf een leeftijd op te zetten? Ik ga jullie eerst een half minuutje tijd geven om daar over na te denken en misschien iets op te schrijven.
    o Bespreken: opsommen, verschillen vergelijken. (Scherm delen, voorbeelden in PPT schrijven)
        i. Van alles dat hier nu is opgeschreven, vinden jullie hier voorbeelden van terug bij de personages uit *Voor altijd samen, amen?*
        ii. Wat valt er voor jullie op aan de antwoorden van de andere deelnemers?
        iii. jij hebt dat niet opgeschreven, is dat voor jou belangrijk?
        iv. Van al deze elementen, welke zijn er dan het belangrijkste?
4. Laten we het nog eens hebben over Polleke.
    o Vonden jullie Polleke geloofwaardig als elfjarig personage?
    o Het boek is in de "ik-vorm" geschreven, zou het volgens jullie door een echte elfjarige geschreven kunnen zijn? Waarom wel of niet?
    o Polleke is een 11 jarig personage geschreven door een schrijver van 57 jaar, en als 11 jarig personage bespreekt Polleke personages van allerlei andere leeftijden. Denken jullie dat het moeilijker is om over personages te schrijven als je zelf veel jonger of ouder bent?
        i. Wat kan een schrijver doen om zich in te leven in personages van andere leeftijden?
5. Ik vond het interessant dat er soms deelnemers toch niet overeen kwamen over leeftijd en personages. Twee verschillende deelnemers bespraken de treinreis van Polleke en Mimoen op de volgende manieren:
        i. Mathilde (68): Ik vond dat heel realistisch dat die spaart om die trein te nemen om dat kalfje te zien

> Slide 1

      ii. Jeroen (10): Dat ze alleen de trein al begint te nemen dat zie ik een tien- of elfjarig iemand nog niet doen.
- o Wat denken jullie hiervan?
- o Met wie gaan jullie voornamelijk akkoord?
- o Hoe oud denken jullie dat de deelnemers zijn die deze uitspraken hebben gemaakt?

6. Polleke zegt op een bepaald moment in het boek: "Grote mensen zijn zooo kinderachtig! Ze zeggen zooo vaak nee tegen mij. Zeg ík een keer nee, dan krijg je zo'n gezicht."

- o Zijn de volwassenen in het boek kinderachtig?

7. Ik zou graag nog eens de leeftijd van Polleke's grootouders bespreken.
- o SCHRIJVEN: kunnen jullie er eerst een chronologische leeftijd op zetten, en een twee- of drietal elementen opschrijven waarom die leeftijd voor jullie past.
- o BESPREKEN VAN RESULTATEN: Hoe oud schatten jullie ze in?
  - i. EERST: leeftijden overlopen zonder verdere opmerkingen
  - ii. (Bespreek opgeschreven kenmerken. Begin bij deelnemer met jongste schatting van leeftijd.) Kan je eens vertellen wat je hebt opschreven?
    1. Luister aandachtig, vraag aan andere deelnemers of dat standpunt ook kunnen begrijpen.
- o Enkele lezers vertelden dit over de grootouders:
  - i. (Mathilde 68): ik vond ze wel een beetje stereotiep, ja ik vond ze een beetje cliché eigenlijk.

  - ii. (Roma 62): "Oma en opa, daar zou ik zeggen ja, die spelen wel duidelijk een grootouder rol maar bijna op het clichématige af. Maar klopt wat zij doen met hun leeftijd? Dat denk ik wel."
    1. Wat denken jullie hierover?
    2. Zijn de grootouders in *Voor altijd samen, amen* stereotiep? En is dat goed/slecht?
- o Wat vonden jullie van de relatie tussen Polleke en haar grootouders?

8. Ik zou graag nog eens de leeftijd van Spiek, Tina en Wouter bespreken.
- o SCHRIJVEN: Ik ga jullie eerst weer even tijd geven om zelf na te denken hierover. Kunnen jullie voor deze 3 personages een leeftijd opschrijven samen met een twee- of drietal dingen waarom je die leeftijd er op plakt.
- o BESPREKEN VAN RESULTATEN: Hoe oud schatten jullie ze in?
  - i. Één per één bespreken. Eerst hoe oud iedereen denkt dat Spiek is, dan Tina, dan Wouter

  - ii. EERST: leeftijden overlopen zonder verdere opmerkingen
  - iii. (Bespreek opgeschreven kenmerken. Begin bij deelnemer met jongste schatting van leeftijd.) Kan je eens vertellen wat je hebt opschreven als passende kenmerken bij die leeftijdsgroep?
    1. Luister aandachtig, vraag aan andere deelnemers of dat standpunt ook kunnen begrijpen.
    2. Bij verschillen: denken jullie dat jullie verschillende ideeën hier met jullie leeftijd te maken hebben?

9. Graag zou ik jullie nog een handvol stellingen laten zien. Ik ben benieuwd of jullie hier eerder mee akkoord gaan of niet, en waarom?

> Slide 3-5

- o Polleke kan soms kinderachtig zijn.
- o Wouter gedraagt zich ouder dan hij is.
- o Spiek zou een betere vader zijn als hij ouder was.

## Quotes: (10 min - 19u35)

Ik vond sommige uitspraken uit de eerste interviews erg interessant. Ik ga er een paar laten zien, en ik vraag me gewoon af wat jullie daar van denken. Jullie mogen gewoon inpikken op de uitspraak en je mening geven en op elkaar antwoorden.

1. (Mathilde 68): "Bij Polleke zelf kon ik haar emoties wel goed begrijpen en zo maar vond ik dat er haar veel dingen in de mond gelegd worden die te volwassen klinken."

> Slide 8

   a. Wat denken jullie hiervan?
   b. Merkten jullie dit ook op?
      i. Wat bedoelt deze lezer met "te volwassen klinken" volgens jullie?
      ii. Zouden jullie een voorbeeld kunnen geven van een uitspraak waar Polleke te volwassen klinkt?
   c. Hebben jullie het tegenovergestelde misschien opgemerkt? Dat Polleke soms te jong klonk?

2. (Dirk 15): In mijn ogen zijn [Wouter en Tina] wel heel snel gegaan naar de positie om te trouwen. Want die waren nog niet zo superlang samen. Ik denk dat je daar wel nog iets langer over moet nadenken voor dat je echt kunt trouwen.

> Slide 19

   a. Was dit jullie ook opgevallen?
   b. Ga je hier mee akkoord?
   c. Hoe lang moet je samen zijn om te kunnen trouwen?

3. (Marjolein 47): "Als Polleke dan vraagt mag ik bij [het kalfje] slapen en dat ze dan ja zeggen en die matras versleuren, dat vind ik zo typerend voor grootouders. Van ouders zou dat nooit mogen denk ik. Maar, Polleke schrikt daar zelf ook van. Dat mag, wie dacht dat! Dat is het voorrecht van grootouder zijn denk ik."

> Slide 9

   a. Wat vinden jullie van het "voorrecht van grootouder te zijn"?
   b. Heeft de leeftijd van de personages hier een invloed?

4. (Maaike 42): "Dat merk ik in dit boek. Dat Polleke soms er moet zijn voor haar moeder ook. En dat is eigenlijk ook mooi, alhoewel dat Polleke nog heel jong is om dat te doen."

> Slide 10

   a. Vinden jullie dit ook?
   b. Is Polleke volgens jullie te jong om zorg te dragen voor haar moeder?

5. Leander: Hoe oud denk je dat grootouders zijn?

> Slide 20

(Dirk 15): Toch wel rond de 80.
Leander: Waarom rond de 80 ongeveer?
(Dirk 15): Omdat die echt nog wel al heel verouderde ideeën hebben en die gedragen zich ook wel zo.

6. (Beatrijs 26): Ik kan mij nu niet inleven in Polleke, maar op mijn elf jaar zou ik het ook niet gekund hebben. Dat is dan één ding dat ze niet juist hadden. Ik zou nooit schreeuwen tegen mijn moeder zoals Polleke de hele tijd aan het schreeuwen is.

> Slide 21

a. Wat vinden jullie van deze uitspraak?

b. Waren er voor jullie dingen die Polleke deed die jij zelf nooit zou doen of gedaan zou hebben toen je elf was?

**Slide 22**

7. (Roma 62): die zit een beetje op de wip tussen enerzijds dat kinderlijke en anderzijds voel je toch dat ze die eerste sprankels of dingen naar volwassenheid of adolescentie heeft. Wat verliefd worden maar ook dat afstand nemen tegenover die mama, dat zich groot beginnen voelen als ze voor haar klein zusje mag zorgen.

a. Wat vinden jullie hiervan?

**Slide 17**

8. (Dirk 15): Spiek heeft ja toch heel vaak nog wat kinderachtige trekken. En gedraagt zich niet altijd even volwassen.

a. Wat vinden jullie hiervan?

b. Wat betekent het voor jullie om je "volwassen" te gedragen?

c. Als je hiermee akkoord gaat, kan je dan een voorbeeld geven van dingen die Spiek doet die niet volwassen zijn?

**Slide 11**

9. (Katrijn 13): "Ik vind dat Wouter eigenlijk wel oud genoeg is om voor zichzelf te beslissen wat die wilt doen en dan vind ik niet dat [Polleke's moeder] daar eigenlijk zo boos over moet zijn. Als hij drie keer per week bij zijn moeder gaat eten dan vind ik wel dat die dat moet blijven doen en dat die dat dan niet zo op het laatste moet afzeggen want het eten zal dan misschien al klaar zijn. Dan vind ik wel dat die gewoon moet gaan."

a. In de context van Wouters relatie met zijn moeder werd af ten toe wel het idee van onafhankelijkheid aangehaald. Dat Wouter meer afstand moet nemen van zijn moeder. Wat denken jullie daarover?

**Slide 12**

10. (Alice 57):

- Alice: Ja de volwassenen maken er maar een zooitje van vind ik, de kinderen zijn een beetje wijzer, heb ik de indruk dan de volwassenen.
- Leander: Komt dat voor jou overeen met de echte wereld?
- Alice: Het komt zeker niet overeen met de echte wereld, maar het stoort niet, het is wel leuk.

  i. Hebben jullie een mening over de wijsheid van kinderen?

  ii. Gaan jullie akkoord dat je dit niet zo snel vindt in de echte wereld?

**Slide 13**

11. (Mathilde 68): "Ze zegt dan tegen die tweede vrouw van Spiek: "Je moest hem zo nodig hebben, wel los het nu maar op, zorg er nu maar voor." Ik denk niet dat op elf jaar kinderen de relaties van hun ouders zo doorgronden om zoiets te zeggen."

**Slide 14**

12. (Marjolein 47): "Ik vond de houding van de grootouders en het bidden aan tafel heel mooi beschreven. Zowel de humor die daarin zat als te moeten bidden en niet weten wat dat is, bidden. Dat vond ik zeer herkenbaar."

**Slide 15**

13. (Joke 27): "Er zijn inderdaad allerlei regeltjes waar dat je dan aan moet voldoen, terwijl kinderen daar helemaal niet zo mee bezig zijn of toch niet zo hard als grote mensen. Er zijn geen wetten in hun kinderhoofd."

**Slide 16**

14. (Joke 27): "Als kind besef je niet hoe weinig verantwoording je nog af te leggen hebt aan de rest van de wereld."

## Algemenere ervaring van leeftijd in het boek: (20 min – 19u55)

**Ik zou ook graag nog enkele vragen willen stellen over hoe jullie kijken naar de verbinding tussen leeftijd en de beleving van het boek.**

11. Aan lezers van welke leeftijd zouden jullie *Voor altijd samen, amen* aanraden?
    - Sommige deelnemers vonden het een zwaar boek, met o.a. besprekingen van racisme, drugs en geloof. Wat vinden jullie daar van?
12. Denken jullie dat mensen door het lezen van boeken beïnvloed kunnen worden in hoe ze kijken naar leeftijd?
    a. Zou *Voor altijd samen, amen* iemands blik op leeftijd kunnen veranderen?
        i. Zo ja, op welke manier?
        ii. Zo nee, waarom niet?
    b. Kan literatuur helpen om mensen van andere leeftijden beter te begrijpen?
    c. Kan literatuur ook slechte ideeën over leeftijd meegeven? Zie je daar iets van bij *Voor altijd samen, amen?*
13. Denken jullie dat hoe oud je bent bepaalt hoe oud je de personages van *Voor altijd samen, amen* inschat?
    o Hebben jullie bepaalde ervaringen gehad in jullie leven die je wilt delen die jullie hebben geholpen om het boek te begrijpen? Ervaringen die andere lezers misschien niet hebben?
    o Ik ga jullie even een halve minuut stilte geven om nog eens na te denken over het boek. Wat ik me afvraag is of jullie een moment, personage, interactie uit het verhaal kunnen bedenken waarvan je denkt dat je er anders naar zou kijken als je ouder of jonger was.
        o Bespreken van moment: Welk stuk is het, hoe denk je dat je blik daarop zou veranderen?
    o Vinden jullie het moeilijker om personages te begrijpen als je zelf minder mensen kent van die leeftijd?
        o Denken jullie dat het belangrijk is dat we contact hebben met mensen van verschillende leeftijden?
        o Kan (kinder)literatuur volgens jullie een gebrek aan contact met mensen van specifieke leeftijden compenseren?
        o Hebben jullie het gevoel dat jullie hebben bijgeleerd over leeftijd via kinderliteratuur?
    o Eén deelnemer vertelde bijvoorbeeld dit:
        i. (Beatrijs 26): Hoe jonger je bent hoe makkelijker je je kunt inleven omdat dat dan nog dicht bij je leeftijd ligt. Maar hoe ouder dat je wordt hoe makkelijker dat je ook vergeet hoe het was om die leeftijd te zijn. Dus je moet echt een inspanning leveren om iemand te willen begrijpen van die leeftijd en te kunnen zeggen van "hoe was je zelf."
        ii. Vonden jullie het bij het lezen van *Voor altijd samen, amen* het moeilijk om je te kunnen inleven in personages die een stuk ouder of jonger waren dan jou?

Slide 18

14. Vinden jullie dat de personages van jullie leeftijd goed afgebeeld werden?
15. Ik heb vaak gevraagd naar verschillen tussen personages van verschillende leeftijden, maar zijn er ook manieren waarop personages van verschillende leeftijden in het boek op elkaar lijken?
    o   Geef ze zeker tijd om na te denken hier
16. Hebben jullie soms het gevoel dat jullie op enkele vlakken anders naar leeftijd kijken dan andere mensen? Kan je daar een voorbeeld van geven?
    o   Heb je enig idee waar dat idee vandaan komt?

## Extra

17. Heeft iemand het boek herlezen?
    o   Zijn er nieuwe dingen je opgevallen na ons interview?

## Sluitingsvragen (5 min)

18. Heeft een andere deelnemer in dit gesprek iets verteld waar je zelf niet aan gedacht zou hebben? Of waar je nog wat dieper op wilt ingaan?
    o   Personages
    o   Ideeën over leeftijd

19. Hebben jullie vragen die je nog aan de groep wilt stellen?
20. Als je één boodschap kon meegeven aan alle schrijvers van kinderboeken, over de manier waarop ze leeftijd weergeven. Wat zou je dan zeggen?

## Post-discussie

Uitleg 2$^{de}$ interviews

# 7. Follow-up interview guide

1. Hoe denk je terug aan het onderzoek?
   a. Wat is je voornamelijk bijgebleven?
   b. Welke vragen vond je het moeilijkste?
   c. **hoe was het voor jou om de jongste/oudste deelnemer te zijn van het focusgroepgesprek?**

2. Heb je iets bijgeleerd uit je deelname aan ons onderzoek?
   a. Hoe je zelf naar leeftijd kijkt in kinderliteratuur.
   b. Hoe mensen van andere leeftijden naar leeftijd in kinderliteratuur kijken.
   c. Hoe leeftijd afgebeeld wordt in kinderliteratuur.

3. Zijn er ideeën over leeftijd waar je nu meer bewust van bent na deel te nemen aan het onderzoek? / Is de manier waarop je nadenkt over leeftijd veranderd?

4. Zijn er reacties van andere deelnemers uit het groepsgesprek die je bijgebleven zijn?

5. Kijk je nu anders naar het boek?

6. Zou je de personages nog steeds dezelfde leeftijden geven?

7. Tijdens het focusgroep gesprek waren jullie het soms eens, en soms oneens. Was er een onderwerp waarbij het je verbaasde dat er verschillende of net gelijkaardige meningen waren?

8. Heb jij nog advies voor ons? Tips om de ervaring van de volgende deelnemers beter te maken?

9. Wil je op de hoogte gehouden worden van de resultaten van het onderzoek?

## 8. *Mijn naam is Nina* interview guide: memories

| Fase 1: kennismaking | 10 min |
| --- | --- |

**Doel**: Eva Magnusson en Jeanne Marecek raden in hun boek over kwalitatieve interviews aan om een opwarmgesprek te laten plaatsvinden voor de aanvang van het echte interview. Ze benadrukken dat deze vragen deels of volledig niet gerelateerd mogen zijn aan het echte onderzoek (56; zie ook King en Horrock 56). Om hier rekening mee te houden wil ik eerst een kort kennismakingsgesprek houden, gericht op het benadrukken dat er geen foute antwoorden zijn en het creëren van een ontspannen sfeer.

- De onderzoeker stelt zich kort voor.
  - o Mijn naam is Leander Duthoy, ik ben doctoraatsstudent aan het Constructing Age For Young Readers project, onder toezicht van professor Vanessa Joosen. Dit is het tweede jaar van mijn onderzoek, dat in totaal 4 jaar zal duren.
  - o De andere persoon die je in dit gesprek ziet is professor Vanessa Joosen, zij beheert het hele project en zal dus vandaag meeluisteren met dit interview.
- Hoe wilt u graag aangesproken worden voor dit interview?

<div align="center">

[BEGIN OPNAME]

</div>

Vragen van:
- Naam
- Geboortedatum

Korte toelichting onderzoek:
- Ons onderzoeksproject bestudeert leeftijd in kinderliteratuur. Mijn specifiek deel van het onderzoek kijkt naar **hoe de leeftijd van de echte lezer het begrip en de interpretatie van leeftijd in kinderliteratuur beïnvloedt.** Daarom ben ik in dit interview voornamelijk benieuwd naar hoe jij kijkt naar de leeftijd van de personages in dit verhaal en naar leeftijd in het algemeen.
- Bespreking van ethische documenten:
  - o Informatiebrief:
  - o Consent form
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    - o **Confidentialiteit**: Uw identiteit en uw deelname aan deze studie worden strikt vertrouwelijk behandeld en wij volgen hierbij de Europese wetgeving (de Algemene Verordening Gegevensbescherming van 25 mei 2018). U zult niet bij naam of op een andere herkenbare wijze geïdentificeerd worden in dossiers, resultaten of publicaties in verband met de studie.
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mogelijkheid om al dan niet aan deze studie deel te nemen of om uw deelname aan de studie stop te zetten.

  o  …

**Vragen van:**
- KEUZE PSEUDONIEM

**Korte toelichting interview:**
- Het is een informeel, rustig gesprek. Maak je zeker comfortabel neem nog iets om te drinken als je dat wilt.
- Er zijn **geen foute antwoorden**, je mag echt zeggen wat je wilt.
- **Neen** is een volledig antwoord, voel je niet geforceerd om iets te antwoorden omdat ik een vraag stel. Als je geen antwoord hebt is dat het juiste antwoord.
- Je mag gerust even **nadenken voor je antwoord**, er is geen haast. Ik ga je af en toe ook extra tijd geven om even na te denken voor je antwoord.
- Je mag altijd nog even **terugkomen op een vorige vraag**, ook al zijn we al over iets anders aan het praten.
- Soms kan het zijn dat de interviewer **vraagt voor verduidelijking**, dat is zeker niet het teken dat je antwoord slecht was, maar eerder dat we het erg interessant vonden en graag meer informatie willen.
- <span style="color:red">**Stiltes** zijn ok. Neem gerust je tijd om na te denken.</span>
- **Vraag om het boek erbij te nemen.**
- Heb jij nog vragen over de vormgeving van het interview voor we beginnen? Het interview zal **ongeveer een uur duren.**

| Fase 2: 4ᵉ Cognition – Emma-Louise | 25 min |
|---|---|

**Readers' experientiality**

- <mark>Wanneer heb je het boek gelezen? Waar heb je het boek gelezen? Hoe heb je het boek gelezen?</mark>
  o  In één keer? In een paar keer?
- Ben je vaak moeten stoppen met lezen? Omdat bijvoorbeeld je aandacht naar iets anders ging?
- <mark>Heb je over het boek gepraat met andere mensen? Waar heb je dan vooral over gesproken?</mark>
- Waar legde je het boek toen je niet aan het lezen was? Vergat je soms dat je het boek aan het lezen was?
- <mark>Vond je het leuk om het boek te lezen?</mark>

**Cognitive and affective engagement**

Caracciolo: experientiality can refer to 'the textual representation of experience' or 'the experiences undergone by the recipients of narrative' (2014: 155).

- Wat vond je minder leuk aan het boek te lezen? Vond je het boek moeilijk om te lezen? Wat vond je van:
  - Taal
  - Onderwerpen
  - Vorm
- Wat vind je van het notitieboek als manier om Nina's gedachten te leren kennen?
- Wat zijn volgens jou de belangrijkste onderwerpen in het boek?
- Toen je het boek las, zou je zeggen dat je toen eerder een goede of slechte week had?

## Age Norms

Caracciolo: 'Thus engaging with narrative not only taps into recipients' repertoire of past experiences (or "experiential background"), but can also produce shifts and changes in this repertoire' (2014: 153-154).

- Hoe oud denk je dat Nina is? Zijn er in het echt ook kinderen zoals Nina? Deed Nina je aan jezelf denken (toen je elf was?). Ben je tijdens het lezen van idee veranderd over hoe oud Nina is?
- Heb jij ooit je gedachten en gevoelens in een notitieboek of dagboek bijgehouden? Zo ja, hoe oud was je toen? Vind je dat dit iets is wat bij een bepaalde leeftijd meer hoort?
- Is jouw idee van mensen van verschillende leeftijden veranderd door dit boek te lezen? Als je nu bijvoorbeeld nadenkt over Nina, haar mama, Juf Suf, Grace, Sophie, Malcolm, de andere kinderen in Corinthian Avenue.
- Wat vind je van Nina's blik op school? Wat vond je van Corinthian Avenue?
- Wat herinner je je nog van de andere leerlingen in Corinthian Avenue?
  - Alicia: snijdt zichzelf
  - Steepy: tatoeages
  - Wilfred: vloeken
  - Gesprekken over medicatie

## Consciousness attribution / consciousness enactment

How do textual cues (and subsequent 'personal remindings') modulate recipients' experience of narrative? Do these experiences contribute to the shift from recognition and sympathy towards contagion and empathy during the reading process?

- Wat deed je meestal grijpen naar een post-itje?
  - Herinner je nog specifieke gevoelens die bij je opkwamen bij zekere post-its?
  - Voelde je je soms net als Nina? Waarom was dat volgens jou? Of waarom net niet?

| | |
|---|---|
| • <mark>Reageerde je lichaam soms op het boek? Bijvoorbeeld kippenvel. Heb je daar specifieke post-its voor die je wilt bespreken?</mark><br>• Waren er post-its die hebben veranderd hoe jij het boek verder las? | |
| **Fase 3: Herinneringen – Leander Duthoy** | 25 min |
| • **Memory exercise: bespreking van herinneringen gekoppeld aan het boek.**<br> o Kan je me over [herinnering] iets meer vertellen?<br> o Hoe oud was je in deze herinnering?<br> o Is dit een herinnering waar je vaak aan denkt?<br> o Hoe voel je je bij deze herinneringen<br>  → verder uitbreiden en inpikken op specifieke herinneringen<br> o Waren je eigen herinneringen voor jou belangrijk om een band te hebben met personages?<br> o Heb je een herinnering die niet overeen komt met wat er in het boek wordt afgebeeld? Een ervaring van jou die misschien totaal anders was dan wat er in het boek staat?<br> o Naast gebeurtenissen, had je soms ook abstractere herinneringen? Ik denk bijvoorbeeld aan geuren, emoties of andere sensaties?<br> o Zijn er voor jou herinneringen die erg belangrijk waren om jouw blik op een personage vorm te geven?<br> o Merk je op dat je bij bepaalde delen van het boek meer herinneringen hebt aangeduid? Hoe denk je dat dat komt?<br>• **Conflict Nina – Juf Suf (129-134)**<br> o Wat vind je van dit stuk in het boek?<br> o Voor welk personage zou je zeggen dat je hier het meeste begrip hebt?<br> o Hoe denk je dat dat komt?<br> o Heb je ook begrip voor het andere personage?<br> o Waren er bij dit stuk uit het boek herinneringen die voor jou belangrijk waren?<br>  - Heb je zelf al ooit zoiets meegemaakt? Hoe denk je dat dat jouw blik op deze scene bepaalt?<br> o Denk je dat jouw leeftijd een invloed heeft op de manier waarop je naar deze scene kijkt?<br> o Vind je Nina en Juf Suf in dit stuk geloofwaardig? | |
| **Fase 4: Overschotvragen** | |
| • Probeer je leeftijd in te schatten als je personages in het boek tegenkomt?<br>• Wat zijn voor jou de belangrijkste dingen waar je naar kijkt om iemands leeftijd in een boek in te schatten? | |

- Juf Suf vs. Malcolm
  - Wie denk je dat er ouder is, Juf Suf of Malcolm?
  - Wat maakt de ene ouder dan de andere?
  - Doorvragen: Waarom denk je dat je die dingen aan die leeftijden linkt?
- Welke volwassene in het boek vind je dat Nina het beste begrijpt?
  - Hoe zie je dat?
  - Wat maakt hun band positief?
- Als je die band vergelijkt met de andere volwassenen in het boek, wat vind je dan beter of slechter aan de manier waarop zij met Nina omgaan?

# 9. *Mijn naam is Nina* interview guide: extraordinary activities

| Fase 1: kennismaking | 5 min |
|---|---|
| Doel: Eva Magnusson en Jeanne Marecek raden in hun boek over kwalitatieve interviews aan om een opwarmgesprek te laten plaatsvinden voor de aanvang van het echte interview. Ze benadrukken dat deze vragen deels of volledig niet gerelateerd mogen zijn aan het echte onderzoek (56; zie ook King en Horrock 56). Om hier rekening mee te houden wil ik eerst een kort kennismakingsgesprek houden, gericht op het benadrukken dat er geen foute antwoorden zijn en het creëren van een ontspannen sfeer. | |

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- Hoe wilt u graag aangesproken worden voor dit interview?

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- o …

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- Stiltes zijn ok. Neem gerust je tijd om na te denken.
- **Vraag om het boek erbij te nemen.**
- Heb jij nog vragen over de vormgeving van het interview voor we beginnen? Het interview zal **ongeveer een uur duren.**

| Fase 2: inleiding over het boek | 10 min |
|---|---|

- Wat vond je van het boek?
  - o Zou je het aanraden aan andere lezers?
  - o Van welke leeftijden?
- Wat vond je van het uitwerken van Nina's "buitengewone bezigheden"?
- Herinner je je nog waar je zoal aan dacht terwijl je aan deze opdrachten aan het werken was?
- Was het eerder makkelijk of eerder moeilijk voor jou om de opdrachten uit te voeren?
  - o Hoe denk je dat dat komt?
- Is er een buitengewone bezigheid die je meer is bijgebleven, voor welke reden dan ook, dan andere?
  - o Is er een buitengewone bezigheid die je moeilijker vond dan andere?
  - o Welke buitengewone bezigheid zou je zeggen dat het belangrijkste was voor jou?

**Het is voor mij ook interessant om te weten als je een opdracht niet zag zitten. Voel je dus zeker niet slecht om eerlijk te zijn dat een opdracht jouw ding niet was en je ze niet hebt uitgewerkt.**

| Fase 3: bijzondere bezigheden | 35 min |
|---|---|

**Bijzondere bezigheid pagina 50:**

- **schrijf een verhaal over jezelf alsof je over iemand anders schrijft.**
- **Schrijf een verhaal over iemand anders alsof je over jezelf schrijft**

- Wat vond je van deze opdracht?
- Hoe heb je hier aan gewerkt?
- Waarom denk je dat Nina dit aanraadt om te doen?
- Kan je voor mij jouw verhalen eens samenvatten?
  - o Waarom heb je dit onderwerp gekozen om in een verhaal te gieten?
  - o Is dit volledig verzonnen of zijn er dingen echt uit gebeurd?
- Waarom heb je voor [personage/persoon] gekozen om over te schrijven?
- Welke van deze twee opdrachten vond je moeilijker?
  - o Waarom?
- Verzin je zelf veel verhalen?
  - o Zo nee, deed je dit vroeger? Vond je het moeilijk om dit nu terug te doen?
    - ▪ Hoe denk je dat dat komt?
  - o <mark>Denk je dat jouw leeftijd jouw verhaal heeft beïnvloed?</mark>

**Bijzondere bezigheid pagina 83:**
- **Schrijf een gedicht dat een woord herhaalt en herhaalt en nog eens en nog eens en nog eens herhaalt tot het woord bijna niets meer voorstelt. (nuttige tip: kies een woord waar je een hekel aan hebt, of dat je bang of ongerust maakt.)**

- Welk woord heb je gekozen?
- Hoe vaak heb je het woord herhaald ongeveer?
- Is er een specifieke reden waarom je dit woord gekozen hebt?
- Wat betekent dit woord voor jou?
- Is dit woord pas de laatste tijd belangrijk geworden voor jou, of denk je hier al langer over na?

**Bijzondere bezigheid pagina 84-85 (doe opdrachten met hemel)**
- Wat vond je van deze opdracht?
- Vond je het eerder makkelijk of moeilijk om dit te doen?
- Kon je je zo verbonden voelen met de dingen waar Nina over schrijft? (bv. de vogels, sterren, duisternis…)
- Begrijp je waarom Nina dit voorstelt en misschien zelf doet?
- Zou je iets gelijkaardig spontaan zelf gedaan hebben?
- Is dit iets wat je in de toekomst nog wilt doen?
- Denk je dat je anders met deze opdrachten was omgegaan als je jonger of ouder was?
  - o (bij positief antwoord): Wat vind je van hoe je nu met die opdracht omgaat, ben je daar tevreden van, vind je dat eerder jammer, of maakt het je niet echt uit?

**Bijzondere bezigheid pagina 169:**
- **Lees de gedichten van William Blake. (vooral als je mevrouw Praatjes heet).**
  - Welke gedichten heb je gelezen?
    - o Waarom heb je die gedichten gekozen om te lezen?
  - Zie je in waarom Nina een fan van William Blake is?
  - Zou je na het lezen van dit boek nog gedichten van Blake willen lezen?
**Bijzondere bezigheid pagina 178:**
- **Schrijf één zin die een hele bladzijde vult.**

- **Schrijf één woord midden op de bladzijde.**
  - Vond je dit moeilijk om te doen?
  - Hoe ging je hierbij te werk?
  - Waar ging je zin uiteindelijk over?
  - Was je verbaasd door wat je uiteindelijk schreef?

**Bijzondere bezigheid pagina 228:**

- **Ga uit wandelen met een streep. Ontdek wat je tekent wanneer je het getekend hebt. Ga uit wandelen met woorden. Ontdek wat je schrijft wanneer je het geschreven hebt. Ga uit wandelen met jezelf. Ontdek waar je heen gaat wanneer je er gekomen bent.**
- **Staar naar de sterren. Reis door ruimte en tijd. Hou je hoofd vast en besef dat je buitengewoon bent. Vergeet niet dat je stof bent. Vergeet niet dat je een ster bent. Ga onder een straatlantaarn staan. Dans en glinster in de lichtstraat**
- **Luister naar het kwetsbare en krachtige dicht bij je hart.**
  - Heb je alle opdrachten uitgevoerd?
    - Zo nee, waarom heb je sommige niet gedaan?
    - Denk je dat je er meer/minder had uitgevoerd als je jonger of ouder was geweest?
    - Wat was jouw beleving van deze opdrachten? Hoe ben je hier mee aan de slag gegaan?
  - Wat heb je getekend?
    - Waarom denk je dat je dit getekend hebt?
  - Wat heb je geschreven?
    - Waarom denk je dat je dit uiteindelijke geschreven hebt?
  - Ben je hiermee bezig in je dagelijkse leven?
    - Waar dacht je allemaal aan bij het uitwerken van deze taken?
    - Zijn er zekere gevoelens die bij je opkwamen tijdens het uitwerken van deze opdrachten?
  - Is het je gelukt om te beseffen dat je buitengewoon bent?

| Fase 4: afsluiting | 10 min |
|---|---|

**Afsluiting:**

- Ik heb niet over elke opdracht uit het boek vragen gesteld. Zijn er nog opdrachten waar jij graag over wilt praten, voor welke reden dan ook?
- Op een schaal van 1 tot 10, hoe verbonden zou je zeggen dat je je voelde met Nina?
  - Denk je dat je dat cijfer hoger of lager zou inschatten als je de opdrachten niet had uitgevoerd?
- De opdrachten worden in het boek bedacht door het hoofdpersonage Nina, heeft het uitwerken van de opdrachten voor jou je blik op Nina veranderd?
  - Nina wordt in het verhaal door enkele kinderen en volwassenen als "niet normaal" bekeken, vond jij dat zelf ook?
  - Denk je dat je meer begrip voor Nina hebt door het uitvoeren van de opdrachten?
- Denk je dat het voor lezers van dit boek een meerwaarde heeft om de opdrachten uit te voeren?

o Denk je dat dat zo is voor lezers van alle leeftijden?

o Is er een verschil volgens jou tussen hoe jongere en oudere lezers met die opdrachten omgaan? Merkte je dat zelf op in jouw persoonlijke leeservaring?

- Had jouw eigen leeftijd een invloed op jouw manier van die opdrachten aan te pakken?

o Zou je anders met die opdrachten zijn omgaan als je jonger was?

o Denk je dat je binnen 10 of 20 jaar de opdrachten anders zou aanpakken?

o Zo ja, waar denk je dat die verandering vandaan komt?

- Had het uitvoeren van de opdrachten volgens jou een invloed op jouw blik op het verhaal?

o Zou je anders naar het boek gekeken hebben als je ondertussen niet met de opdrachten bezig was?

**Vraag om notities/opdrachten op te sturen**

**Extra vragen:**

• Wat vond jij van Nina's blik op het onderwijs?

• Hoe oud denk je dat Nina's moeder was?

o Waarom?

• Wie was er volgens jou ouder, Malcolm of Juf Suf?

o Waarom?

o Hoe komt het dat je dat weet? Waar denk je dat dat inzicht vandaan komt?

• Probeer je leeftijd in te schatten als je personages in het boek tegenkomt?

• Wat zijn voor jou de belangrijkste dingen waar je naar kijkt om iemands leeftijd in een boek in te schatten?

• Wanneer heb je het boek gelezen? Waar heb je het boek gelezen? Hoe heb je het boek gelezen?

o In één keer? In een paar keer?

• Ben je vaak moeten stoppen met lezen? Omdat bijvoorbeeld je aandacht naar iets anders ging?

• Heb je over het boek gepraat met andere mensen? Waar heb je dan vooral over gesproken?

• Waar legde je het boek toen je niet aan het lezen was? Vergat je soms dat je het boek aan het lezen was?

• Vond je het leuk om het boek te lezen?

• Conflict Nina – Juf Suf (129-134)

o Wat vind je van dit stuk in het boek?

o Voor welk personage zou je zeggen dat je hier het meeste begrip hebt?

- o Hoe denk je dat dat komt?
- o Heb je ook begrip voor het andere personage?
- o Waren er bij dit stuk uit het boek herinneringen die voor jou belangrijk waren?
    - Heb je zelf al ooit zoiets meegemaakt? Hoe denk je dat dat jouw blik op deze scene bepaalt?
- o Denk je dat jouw leeftijd een invloed heeft op de manier waarop je naar deze scene kijkt?
- o Vind je Nina en Juf Suf in dit stuk geloofwaardig?
- Welke volwassene in het boek vind je dat Nina het beste begrijpt?
    - o Hoe zie je dat?
    - o Wat maakt hun band positief?
- Als je die band vergelijkt met de andere volwassenen in het boek, wat vind je dan beter of slechter aan de manier waarop zij met Nina omgaan?

## 9.1. The English prompts for the extraordinary activities

EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

(THIRD-PERSON VERSION): Write a story about yourself as if you're writing about somebody else.

(FIRST-PERSON VERSION): Write a story about somebody else as if you're writing about yourself.

EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

Stare at Dust that Dances in the Light

EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

Write a poem that repeats a word and repeats a word and repeats a word and repeats a word until it almost loses its meaning. (It can be useful to choose a word that you don't like, or that scares or disturbs you.)

EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

(DAYTIME VERSION)

Touch the tip of the index finger to the tip of the thumb, making a ring. Look through the ring into the sky.* See the great emptiness there. Contemplate this emptiness. Wait Don't move. Perhaps there is a tiny dot in the emptiness, which is a skylark singing so high up that it's almost out of sight. Perhaps not. Perhaps there

really is just emptiness. Sooner or later a bird will appear for a second in your view and will fly away. Something appears in nothing, and then disappears. Keep looking. Sooner or later another bird will appear to take its place. Keep looking. It may be that several birds appear together. Keep looking. Keep looking. Allow the extraordinary sky into your mind. Consider the fact that your head is large enough to contain the sky. That is all, and it is hardly anything at all. No need to write anything down unless you would like to. Just remember. And wonder. And do the activity again when you have a moment. Do not worry about staring into space. It is an excellent thing to do.

## EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

(NIGHTTIME VERSION)

Touch the tip of the index finger to the tip of the thumb, making a ring. Look through the ring into the sky.* See the great abundance there. Contemplate this abundance: the stars and galaxies, the planets, the great great darkness, the stars so far away in time and space they look like scatterings of silver dust. Consider the unimaginable amount of space and time that is circled by the ring you have made. Consider that this unimaginable amount is just a tiny fragment of the universe, of eternity. Keep looking. Keep looking. Things will move across your vision: a flickering bat, a swooping owl; the high-up light of an airplane, the slow slow flashing of a satellite. Keep looking. Keep looking. Allow the abundant night into your mind. Consider the fact that your head is large enough to contain the night. That is all, and it is hardly anything at all. No need to write anything down unless you would like to. Just remember. And wonder. And do the activity again when you have a moment. Do not worry about staring into the dark. It is an excellent thing to do.

## EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

Write an empty page. This is quite easy. Now look closely at the emptiness. This is quite easy, too, and quite delightful

## EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

Go to the loo. Flush your pee away. Consider where it will go to and what it will become.

## EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

(JOYOUS VERSION)

Write a page of words for joy.

**EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY**

(SAD VERSION)

Write a page of words for sadness.

**EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY**

Write a page of UTTER NONSENSE.

This will produce some very fine

NEW WORDS.

It could also lead to some very

SENSIBLE RESULTS.

**EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY**

Go to sleep.

Sleep while you fly.

**EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY**

Read the Poems of William Blake. (Especially if you are Ms. Palaver)

**EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY**

Write a sentence which fills a whole page.

**EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY**

Write a single word at the center of a page.

**EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY**

Take a line for a walk. Find out what you're drawing when you've drawn it. Take some words for a walk. Find out what you're writing when you've written it. Take yourself for a walk. Find out where you're going when you get there.

**EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY**

Stare at the stars. Travel through space and time. Hold your head and know that you are extraordinary. Remind yourself that you are dust. Remind yourself that you are a star. Stand beneath a streetlamp. Dance and glitter in a shaft of light

**EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY**

Listen for the frail and powerful thing at your heart

# 10. Griet's and Astrid's stories

**Griet (58): Write a story about yourself as if you're writing about somebody else.**

Winnetou

She read Winnetou.

She WAS Winnetou.

Brave, not a muscle twitching in your face at a sign of danger.

She read in the long summers, looking for something to read in her grandparents' house. Jommeke (bound with brown wrapping paper), cut from the newspapers by Jeanne, her great-aunt. She read "the holy Maria Goretti," who gave her life for her purity.

She read "the holy Victorinus, martyr in China," who—even in the worst of pains—did not betray his faith.

Brave, brave, no cowards. But she was afraid of pain. She'd never be brave in real life. But she was in her mind. In her mind she had long hair, she rode a horse, conquered everyone, was a brave Indian, always knew what to do. She thought it really sufficed to lead an exciting life strictly in books and in her daydreams. She thought things quickly became (too) scary. When she was watching Huckleberry Finn on tv, she was always frightened by Indian Joe (she disliked that an Indian was the bad guy.) With her sisters she played between the sheets that hung to dry on the clothesline while imagining they were fleeing in the dark hallways of the cave. Each of the sisters wanted to be Becky, the only girl in the story, with braids in her hair that swung around when she quickly moved her head left to right to see if there was danger.

She grew up.

She became an adult.

She heard about awful things in the news.

She knew that the couldn't be a coward, nor did she want to be.

She didn't always know how.

Deep in her heart she knew that she still wasn't fully adult. She has kids of her own now. She thinks that she would be very brave if they are ever in danger.

She still doesn't know how brave she will be in actual danger, because she has no dangerous life.

And she is happy about that. She is still scared by tense scenes in movies. Even in Paddington the Bear. She is a moviemaker's ideal audience.

No, she isn't brave. At best she tries to respond to bullies and racists. (Unless there are too many of them and there is no point.)

When her children are stressed for an exam or something else that requires courage, she calls them Winnetou or brave hamster (the one that says: I want it, I can do it, I do it)

Maybe that is (enough) bravery for now.


### Griet (58): Write a story about somebody else as if you're writing about yourself (= Pierre Brice, the actor who played Winnetou in the 1960s)

Winnetou

I feel it in my back. I have to hold the table to be able to stand without too much pain. There isn't much polish to getting old.

And definitely not if you've been in the spotlight for years.

I am dreading having to wear those fake suede pants and tunic at next month's fundraiser. I'll probably have to eat less for several days in advance so my gut is not noticeable poking out. And my hair. Thin and grey is not really believable for an Apache.

They asked me to once more sing "Winnetou, du warst mein Freund"

I do it for the organization. For me it takes 10 minutes of pushing through the disgust of the actor that doesn't know that you need to quit when you are at your peak.

Hella convinced me. She said that it will raise much money the profit of the fundraiser will multiply if the "real Winnetou" hits the stage.

It's just that the real Winnetou never got old. Well, the real fictional Winnetou. I do it for the kids. Just a bit longer in the home gym so that I can get up the stage stairs without help.


### Astrid (68): Write a story about yourself as if you're writing about somebody else.

She is 68, alone, happy in a nice house with a garden, birds, chickens, frogs and salamanders. Time is slowly running out. Many memories but what is still possible? What with the coming generations? And what will with her grandchildren have to deal with?

# 11. Transcription guide

*"There is one basic rule in transcription: state explicitly in the report how the transcriptions were made." – Kvale 95*

Contact Informatie:

Leander Duthoy

D.017

Leander.duthoy@uantwerpen.be

Aarzel niet om me te contacteren als je vragen hebt over het transcriberen. Ik beantwoord veel liever dezelfde vraag 83 keer, dan dat ik al de transcripten nog eens moet verbeteren.

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Bedankt voor je interesse in mee te werken aan de CAFYR interview-transcripties. In totaal zullen we honderden uren transcriptiewerk hebben, en jouw hulp is vitaal om dit werk succesvol te volbrengen.

Ik wil eerst en vooral de tijdsinvestering van transcriberen benadrukken. Transcripties kunnen niet "snel snel" gemaakt worden. Vakliteratuur omtrent transcriberen geeft schattingen tussen 3 en 8 uur transcribeerwerk, per uur aan audio (King and Horrocks 143; Magnusson and Marecek 74; Kvale 95; Cohen 281). Houd dit in je achterhoofd voor je begint te transcriberen.

### Beginnen met transcriberen

Je krijgt toegang tot de interview video's/opnames via de Nextcloud van de UA. Als je verkiest om de video's enkel online bekijken, gebruik dan Firefox. Deze browser bevat de optie om video's aan 0.5x snelheid af te spelen, wat het transcriberen makkelijker maakt. Je hebt echter ook toestemming om de bestanden te downloaden, zolang deze veilig offline (m.a.w. niet op Google Drive, OneDrive,...) opgeslagen worden.

Sommige media-spelers (bv. VLC) kunnen audio/video aan specifieke snelheden afspelen. Het gebruik hiervan is optioneel, maar kan het transcriptie proces helpen. De transcripties mogen uitgewerkt worden in Notepad, Word, een textfile in Nextcloud of via InqScribe. InqScribe is gratis transcriptie-software waarmee je via je toetsenbord ook de video kan besturen terwijl je typt. Ik raad aan dit programma te gebruiken, maar het is niet verplicht. Denk eraan dat de gratis versie van InqScribe *niet toestaat dat je transcripten opslaat*. Typ dus je werk uit in InqScribe, maar denk er zeker aan dit te kopiëren naar een tekstbestand (Word, notepad) voor je afsluit. Je kan dit terug plakken in InqScribe als je wilt verder

werken. InqScribe bevat ook de optie om via een keyboard-shortcut automatische timestamps toe te voegen aan het document. Dit bespaart ook tijd.

Sla de transcriptie bestanden, net zoals de video-bestanden, veilig op. Je mag Nextcloud gebruiken om alle bestanden waar je mee werkt op te slaan, maar doe dit wel in je eigen folder, zodat de hoofdmap overzichtelijk blijft.

### Het transcriptiedocument

We gebruiken het volgende systeem voor de namen van de bestanden:

53 IC01 (Jimmy)

Het eerste cijfer (53) verwijst naar de leeftijd van de deelnemer **op het moment van het interview/groepsgesprek.** Het tweede cijfer (01) verwijst naar de interviewcyclus. Tussen aanhalingstekens voegen we het pseudoniem toe van de deelnemer.

In het begin van het transcript voegen we de volgende informatie toe.

datum van het interview/groepsgesprek (DD/MM/YYYY)
Besproken boek – auteur
getranscribeerd door [jouw naam]

Bijvoorbeeld:

26/04/2020
Iep! – Joke Van Leeuwen
getranscribeerd door Leander Duthoy

Alle nodige informatie (pseudoniem, data,..) vind je terug in het "participants" excel bestand op Nextcloud. Mocht je de informatie toch niet terugvinden mag je me zeker contacteren, misschien ben ik het vergeten aanvullen of is het niet duidelijk.

### Regels voor de transcriptie:

We streven voor CAFYR naar transcripten die grotendeels de letterlijke verwoording van de deelnemers reflecteert, met een paar aanpassingen om de leesbaarheid te verhogen. Dit betekent het volgende:

- We **behouden** dialecte woorden en grammatisch problematische zinnen.
  - Dialecte woordenschat zoals: "goesting", "ambras",… wordt letterlijk overgenomen in de transcripten.
  - Als je een woord tegenkomt dat je niet herkent, contacteer mij dan of je mede-transcribeerders. Vermijd orthografische schrijfwijzen tenzij het echt niet anders kan.
- We **behouden** samentrekkingen en onuitgesproken woorden **niet**:

- o "kheb" → "Ik heb"
- o "da hedde gij" → "Dat heb jij"
- o "swel een goe idee" → "Dat is wel een goed idee"
- We verwijderen herhaalde woorden of "false starts" (deelnemers beginnen aan een zin, veranderen van idee en beginnen opnieuw) in gevallen waar het niets toevoegt aan de boodschap van wat de participant vertelt. Hieronder staan enkele voorbeelden:
  - o Ik ik het werd het sprak mij wel aan → Het sprak mij wel aan
  - o dus maar ik ik maar ik maar ik bekijk het dan → Maar ik bekijk het dan
  - o eigenlijk die die mensen die die die een beetje → Eigenlijk die mensen die een beetje
- Deelnemers beginnen soms aan een zin en veranderen pas erg laat van idee, of ze maken hun zin simpelweg niet af. In die gevallen mag je dit aanduiden met "-." Het idee hierbij is dat we nadien zeker zijn dat er niets gemist is tijdens het transcriberen. In de onderstaande voorbeelden weten we zo zeker dat er bijvoorbeeld niets achter "precies" en "dat" stond.
  - o En die Loetje die was zo precies- die was niet echt onder de indruk.
  - o Voor de rest merk ik dat-. Ik heb het boek twee keer dus gelezen.

  Soms lijkt het logischer om hiervoor een komma te gebruiken. Dit mag je zelf beslissen. Wees enkel zo consequent mogelijk en houd steeds de leesbaarheid van het document in gedachten.
- We voegen leestekens toe aan het transcript. Als je dit doet, voeg deze dan zoveel mogelijk toe om de spreekwijze van de deelnemer na te bootsen, niet wat jou logisch lijkt. Als je twijfelt, stuur me dan een mailtje.
- Je moet niet elke "euhm", "uhu" of "ah" aanduiden die de deelnemer of interviewer gebruikt. Laat de meeste hiervan uit het transcript tenzij je echt denkt dat het belangrijk is om het gesprek te begrijpen.
- We voegen momenten van gelach of gezucht wel toe. Je mag ook andere betekenisvolle momenten op dezelfde manier toevoegen. Bijvoorbeeld:

  P: Omdat mijn bomma dat ook altijd deed.

  I: [lacht]
- Een pauze is voor ons belangrijk vanaf 3 seconden of langer. Net zoals gelach, gezucht, etc.… worden deze toegevoegd in [haakjes]. Dit ziet er zo uit:

  P: Ik had niet gedacht dat dat personage dat ging doen. [pauze] Dat verbaasde me echt.

  OF

  I: Had je gedacht dat dat personage dat ging doen?

  [pauze]

> P: Nee dat had ik niet gedacht.

- Data wordt geanonimiseerd (namen van beroemde mensen zoals zangers, acteurs of politiekers kan je behouden). Deelnemers hebben een pseudoniem gekregen: verwijzingen naar de deelnemer binnen het transcript maken gebruik van dit pseudoniem. Je mag tags zoals [naam van interviewer], [naam van vriend] of [naam van professor] gebruiken om andere namen te vervangen. Namen van fictieve personages worden uiteraard behouden. Delete ook zeker niet-fictieve telefoonnummers of adressen waarmee iemand geïdentificeerd kan worden.
- We gebruiken het volgende systeem om onduidelijke passages aan te duiden: [X] voor een onduidelijk geluid of klank van één woord, [XX] voor 2 onduidelijke woorden, en [XXX] voor meer dan twee woorden.[276]

## Lay-out:

- We duiden het begin van elke minuut van de opname aan in het transcript. Dit maakt het nadien makkelijker om terug naar specifieke momenten uit de opname terug te luisteren. Dit ziet er zo uit: [uren:minuten:seconden.milliseconden].

> I: Vraag
>
> [00:6:00.00]
>
> P: Antwoord

Dit hoeft **niet** juist te zijn tot op de (milli)seconde. Voeg een timestamp toe vlak voor of na iemand begint te spreken. Behoud hier ook de leesbaarheid van het transcript. Timestamps zoals [00:17:56.29][277] zijn daarom ook zeker goed. Het formaat is het belangrijkste: deze timestamps worden herkend door InqScribe.
- De interviews zijn grofweg verdeeld in "beurten." De beurt van de interviewer begint met het stellen van een vraag. De beurt van de deelnemer bestaat dan uit een antwoord. De beurt van de interviewer wordt aangeduid met "I:", de beurt van de deelnemer met "P:"
- Elke beurt begint op een nieuwe lijn, zolang de persoon spreekt gebruiken we de entertoets niet. Zoals eerder aangegeven gebruiken we wel leestekens. Tussen twee beurten voegen we één lege rij met witruimte toe door 2x op enter te duwen. Bijvoorbeeld:

> I: Vraag?

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[276] Dit punt en het vorige zijn gebaseerd op guidelines uit: De Wit, Astrid. *International Student English Corpus Guidelines*. 2019.

[277] Ik kopieer de transcripties in InqScribe. In dit programma kan ik via links met milliseconden naar het exact juiste moment in de opname gaan. Als je niet met InqScribe werkt, is het moeilijker om de milliseconden af te lezen. Het is niet erg dat je dan afrondt naar de dichtstbijzijnde seconde.

P: Antwoord.

- De reden hiervoor is dat dit ook in programma's zoals notepad een witte rij toevoegt. (Zie hieronder).

```
1  I: Speaking speaking speaking speaking
2
3  P: Responding responding responding responding
4
```

- In elk interview zijn er wel korte momenten waarop de interviewer en deelnemer tegelijk spreken. In die gevallen gebruiken we wederom een [haakje om aan te duiden waar de overlappende spraak begint.

P: Dat is waarom ik denk d[at Thomas dat deed.

I: [En wat dacht je over Marie?

Gebruik je gezond verstand om te bepalen wanneer het belangrijk is om overlappende spraak aan te duiden. Als de interviewer kort "uhu" zegt tijdens een zin van de deelnemers, hoef je dit niet telkens aan te duiden op het transcript.

**Wanneer beginnen transcriberen:**

De meeste opnames beginnen met het geven van informatie over de vrijwillige deelname van de deelnemers aan de studie, de geheimhouding van informatie en het eventueel beantwoorden van praktische vragen. Zolang de deelnemer niets vertelt over het boek, of over persoonlijke ervaringen die al te maken hebben met leeftijd, hoef je dit stuk niet te transcriberen. Transcripties starten meestal bij de eerste vraag die de interviewer stelt.

**Wat doe je als je klaar bent met transcriberen?**

Stuur me een kopie door via mail. Ik zal het toevoegen aan de Nextcloud.

**Bibliografie:**

King, Nigel, and Christine Horrocks. *Interviews in Qualitative Research*. Sage, 2010.

Kvale, Steinar. *Doing Interviews*. Sage, 2007.

Magnusson, Eva, and Jeanne Marecek. *Doing Interview-Based Qualitative Research*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Cohen, Louis, et al. 'Interviews'. *Research Methods in Education*, 5th ed., RoutledgeFalmer, 2005.

Twee tips:

1.  Transcripties vereisen veel tijd om uit te werken. Als je iets van tijd wilt besparen is het mogelijk om hoofdletters tijdens het typen over te slaan. Lindsey Geybels heeft een script uitgewerkt dat automatisch hoofdletters toevoegt als je klaar bent met transcriberen. Je mag daarom je hoofdletter-loos document naar mij doorsturen en dan zal ik de hoofdletters via dat script toevoegen.
2.  Ik raad aan om met InqScribe te werken maar het programma is zeker niet perfect. Zo heeft het bijvoorbeeld geen ingebouwde spell-checker. In plaats van alles manueel na te lezen in InqScribe raad ik aan om het uit te typen in InqScribe en dan af en toe het in Word te copy pasten om daar een spell-check uit te voeren.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Ik, ………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………….
(naam),
medewerkend student in de onderzoeksgroep van Vanessa Joosen in het academiejaar 2020, verklaar hierbij dat ik op de hoogte ben dat het materiaal dat mij ter beschikking gesteld is, vertrouwelijke gegevens bevat. Wanneer ik bezig ben met het transcriberen van dit materiaal, bewaar ik het op een beveiligde computer, en niet in een cloud of gedeelde map. Ik deel het materiaal onder geen beding met mensen buiten de onderzoeksgroep.

Nadat de transcripties afgewerkt zijn, bezorg ik ze aan Leander Duthoy en verwijder ik alle bestanden van mijn computer.
Antwerpen, xxx (datum)

# 12. Nvivo coding tree

- Reader
  - Age Norms
    - + gender
    - Social construction
      - Fact
      - Not age related
    - Adultness
      - Aetonormativity
      - Age (Un)Awareness
      - Age Norm Criticism
      - Ageism
      - Attitude
      - Caring
        - Grootouders van Polleke
        - Iep
        - Loetje
        - Loetje's vader
        - Ouders van de redder
        - Warre en Tine
        - Mimoen
        - Ouders Mimoen
        - Polleke
        - Tina
        - Wouter
    - Childishness
    - Decline Narrative
    - Deficit Model
    - Developmentalist view
    - Disengagement Theory
    - Emotions
      - Anger
      - Anxiety
      - Confidence
      - Disgust
      - Fear
      - Happiness
      - Jealousy
      - Loneliness
      - Love
      - Pity
      - Regret
      - Relaxation
      - Sadness
      - Shame
    - Family & belonging
    - Fantasy & play
      - And age of real readers
      - And characters
      - Definitions

- Pathologization
- Play
- Suitability
- Wonder
- Hokjesdenken
  - Innocence & Experience
    - Sex
  - Kinship & Difference model
  - Marriage & Relationships
  - Normalization of age
  - Occupation
  - Power
    - Autonomy
    - Conforming
    - Freedom
    - Independence
    - Other
    - Responsibilities
  - Relativiteit van leeftijd
  - Religion
  - Routine
  - Second Childhoods + Infantilization
  - Theory of Mind
    - Adolescents
    - Kinderen
    - Volwassenen
  - Third and Fourth age
  - Wisdom
- COVID-19
- Meta-reflections
  - Infant
  - Child
    - Earlychild
    - Middlechild
    - Latechild
  - Adolescent
  - Adults
    - Earlyadult
    - Middleadult
    - Oldadult
    - Deepoldadult
  - Perceived Differences
- Eigen ervaringen (views on age & LC)
  - Other Insights
  - Books
  - Humans
  - Family
  - Friends
  - School
  - Significant Other
  - Work
  - No experience

- - Reflections on Self
  - Social factors
    - Society
  - o Thoughts on Own Age
    - Flashbacks
  - o SC-Background & Ideological Beliefs
  - o Reflections on Children's Literature
    - Age Norms
    - Appreciation
    - Double Address
    - Inhoud (poëzie, betekenis,…)
    - Schrijfstijl
  - o Post-Research
    - New Insights
    - Verandering na onderzoek
  - o Changes
  - o Reading Habits
  - o Uncertainty
- Reader-Book
  - o Assessment of Impact
    - Gepastheid
    - Impact on Interviewee
    - Lessen & Moralen & Take-aways
      - About Others
        - o Care for children
        - o Connecting people
        - o Empathy
        - o Mental health
        - o Negative examples
        - o You can't change people
      - About yourself
        - o Be kind
        - o Can't always get what you want
        - o Develop fantasy
        - o Don't run away
        - o Don't talk to the cops
        - o Endurance
        - o Everyone is different
        - o Fears
        - o Freedom
        - o It's ok to make mistakes
        - o Saying goodbye
        - o Self-reflection
        - o Value of childlike perspective
        - o Wary of deception
      - Adult
      - Child
      - None - Don't know
  - o Characters
    - Aging
      - Changes
      - Closest in Age

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- Difficult to Age
- Appearance
- Books
  - Iep!
    - Bor
    - Jongen op het dak
    - Jongen uit de groene afdeling
    - Loetje
    - Droom
    - Leeftijd
    - Ouders van de Redder
    - Redder
    - Vader van Loetje
    - Functie in het verhaal
    - Leeftijd
    - Viegeltje
    - Warre en Tine
  - MNIN
    - Directeur
    - Grace
    - Grootvader
    - Juf Suf
    - Malcolm
    - Mama
    - Myers
    - Nina
    - papa
    - Praatjes & Co
    - Sleepy
    - Sofie
  - VASA
    - Caro
    - Dina
    - Grootouders
    - Kalfje
    - Mimoen
    - Moeder Mimoen
    - Moeder Wouter
    - Ouders Mimoen
    - Polleke
      - 3 woorden
    - Sina
    - Spiek
    - Tina
    - Wouter
- Favourite-Be-Identification
  - Be
  - Favourite characters
    - Disliked characters
    - Geen favoriet personage
  - Identification
- Future

# Appendices

- Motivation
- Traits
  - Actions
  - Body
  - Mind
- Verisimilitude
- Illustrations
- Mijn naam is Nina
  - (dis)likes about the book
  - Approach to reading
  - Bijzondere bezigheden
    - Blake
    - Blije & droevige woorden
    - Buitengewoon
    - Completion & struggles
    - Dansen
    - Dapper
    - Herhalen
    - Ik & jij verhaal
    - Kijk naar hemel
    - Lange zin
    - Onzin
    - Plas
    - Sterren
    - Stofjes in het licht
    - Tekenen
    - Wandelen
  - Context
  - Corinthian Avenue
  - Form of the book
  - Inner thoughts
  - Lichaam
  - Memories & past events
  - Quantity of memories
  - Reader environment
  - Social
- Plot
  - Appreciated moments
  - Favorite moment
  - Iep! - Horstel
- Quotes
- Recognition
- (Inter)generational interaction
  - Empathy
    - Emotional contagion
    - Perspective taking
    - Sympathy
  - Fiction
    - Ambivalent
    - Different
    - Same
  - Focus group

- ▪ Instemming
  - o Real Life
    - ▪ Different
    - ▪ Same
  - o Understanding
- Valence
  - o -
  - o +
  - o +-
  - o Confusion

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