

REGIONAL AND GLOBAL READERS:
TRANSNATIONAL APPROACHES TO BOOK HISTORY AND
LITERARY SOCIOLOGY IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES¹

*Summary: This paper explores the historiography of *History of Reading* in a Nordic context. The populations of the Nordic countries were probably the first in the world to ascend to mass literacy, and widespread basic reading ability was achieved by the early 1700s. The Nordic countries have always been dependent on the import of literature, both in translation and in the original language. In that sense, the Nordic readers can be said to have constituted “glocal” reading communities, with ties to both local and global book markets. The Nordic book market of the nineteenth century was marked by transnational exchanges and political and linguistic co-operation, and only by then was access to books fully democratised. Future studies should take archival sources that can reveal reading habits on both a macro and micro level into careful consideration. It is further essential to compare the findings from both regional and global case studies in order to detect general patterns of book consumption.*

From national to international perspectives within the History of the Book and the History of reading

Traditionally, most academic studies addressing issues such as reading communities and book market developments have been characterised by national perspectives, regardless of the institutional affiliation, be it within the context of sociology of literature or book history. Studies of books and readers have always had certain national orientations, for example the Anglo-American tradition of descriptive and enumerative bibliography or the French socio-cultural Annales-school. And the school of literary sociology in the Nordic countries is, for example, quite different from the one in Germany.

The fields of book history and literary sociology both can be said to trace their roots back to the nineteenth century, but they have only emerged as fully developed academic subjects in the past decades. The two research traditions have a lot of similarities and the amount of overlap is considerable, although there are differences. I will not elaborate on the differences between the two here, merely mention a couple of distinctions between the two subjects. Literary sociology engages in literary analysis and focuses on the relation between society and literature, whereas book history addresses issues such as the book market in general, and the materiality of texts.

In the wake of the institutionalisation of the two subjects, numerous ambitious and groundbreaking studies have followed in the fields of literature and reading. Many of these have explored issues concerning reading in a primarily national perspective.

¹ This paper was delivered as the assigned topic for a trial lecture held by Dr Henning Hansen as part of his PhD defence at UiT: The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, 16 March 2018.

Grand projects exploring issues such as reading and book markets in a national perspective have been compiled in for example France, Germany, Canada, Britain, the Netherlands, Australia, and Japan. One of the most recently launched national book projects is the Norwegian LitCit project, short for [Literary Citizens of the World](#). The project focuses on early modern book culture in Norway and is funded by the Norwegian Research Council, but as the project title suggests, it sets out to address both national international issues. The LitCit project, which was launched in 2016 and will run through 2020, highlights the commemoration of the 500 years anniversary of the first Norwegian book, which was printed in 1519. In one way the LitCit project is thereby firmly based on a national framework. But the complexity in defining a national book market and literary boundaries is beautifully illustrated in this particular example, by the fact that the first Norwegian book, which was printed in 1519, was actually printed in France, and it was not in Norwegian, but in Latin.

The reason the national perspective remains compelling can by no means be explained by ignorance or a disinterest in the international connotations of literature and books. Already in his famous 1982 article “What is the History of Books?” did Robert Darnton point out that “Book Historians have always recognized the arbitrariness of confining their subject within national boundaries.”² Sydney Shep, who has studied the globalisation of the field, or what she calls the “Trans-National turn in Book History,” points out that taking on a global perspective is more easily said than done. It quickly becomes overwhelming. It is more tempting to take on something of a micro-historical narrative than to carry the weight of a global history project. Nonetheless, however, in recent years, focus has shifted increasingly towards transnational phenomena and even global conditions. As Shep points out: “... the idea of ‘place’ has shifted from being a geospatial locator to a metaphor of belonging, a kind of imagined geography which functions as a node in a larger, interlinked and interdependent world.”³ Eva Hemmungs-Wirtén further argues that we need “to question old truths regarding method and theory as well as the basic requirement of the nation-state as our given investigative point of departure.”⁴

The turn towards transnational perspective within the field of the history of the book is, however, far from a new invention. Already in the 1950s, Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin devoted a chapter of their groundbreaking book *L'apparition du livre* (1958; Eng. trans. 1978, *The Coming of the Book*) to the “The Geography of the book.” An increased focus on the mobility of texts highlights the fact that texts are never confined by the borders of a nation state. Although one may argue that the book market has become more and more transnational over the years, the transnational exchange has always been of vital importance for the production, dissemination, and consumption of texts. The first books printed in the Nordic countries were for example printed by itinerant German printers such as Johann Snell and Bartholomaeus Ghotan, and for centuries, much of the book trade was de-centralised and dependent on travelling book peddlers and regional book markets. The mobility of literature was marked by a spatial flexibility in terms of dissemination and production.

² Robert Darnton, “What is the history of books?”, first published in *Daedalus*, Summer 1982.

³ Sydney Shep, “Imagining Post-National Book History,” *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* (104:2 June 2010).

⁴ Eva Hemmungs-Wirtén, “Surveying the (Battle) field, Book History, SHARP, and the Guerilla Tactics of Research,” *SHARP-news* (12:1, 2003:4).

The state of the disciplines in the Nordic countries

If we take a few steps back for a moment, how do the ideas of trans-nationalism translate into a Nordic scholarly perspective? First of all, there are a number of different research traditions in the Nordic countries exploring history of reading, with researchers from a wide range of different academic backgrounds. In Finland, the subject of book history and history of reading is affiliated with ecclesiastical history. In Sweden, studies on readers and reading are for example conducted in Uppsala, at the Section for Sociology of Literature at the Department of Literature; at Lund University, at the division for Book History, which is a part of the Department of Cultural Sciences; and at the Swedish School of Library and Information Science in Borås. In Denmark and Norway, studies concerning history of reading are conducted by historians and literary scholars at several of the universities as well as at the National Libraries. And here you are today, listening to a presentation hosted by the Department of Archaeology, History, Religious Studies and Theology. The range of different institutional affiliations and the various academic backgrounds of the scholars studying the history of reading naturally have implications for the orientation of the research taking place in the Nordic countries today.

When it comes to the subject of history of reading, a few scholars in the Nordic countries have employed research models that benefit from their unique access to the generally well-kept public records. These sources include censuses and church records, which lend themselves to further knowledge on issues concerning reading and literacy. Some of the studies on these issues have managed to attract international interest, not least the ground-breaking studies conducted by Egil Johansson, who used the famous Swedish household examination records to conduct literacy studies. The remarkably early ascent to mass literacy in the Nordic countries, earlier than any other place in the world, has also created unique possibilities to study reading habits. Unlike many other places in the world, the access to basic reading skill was not exclusive to the upper classes, which means that access to books meant access to reading, regardless of socio-economic status.

The scholarship in the Nordic countries addressing issues such as readers, reading and literacy have used a range of different kinds of sources. The choice of method and source material is naturally closely intertwined with the objective of the study. Some researchers have used resources that lend themselves to quantitative studies of reading; others have used sources that can be used qualitative research. Some of the most common kinds of sources used for reading studies include estate inventories, auction protocols, correspondence and diaries, library and bookshop records, and interviews. There are also scholars who have found other ways of identifying and studying readers and readership. Among the more inventive studies are for example Eric Johannesson, who used preserved records from a lottery to categorise subscribers of a Swedish magazine in the 1870s according to social class,⁵ and Minna Ahokas, who used censorship protocols and newspaper advertisements to detect literary preferences in Finland during the eighteenth century.⁶

⁵ Eric Johannesson, *Den läsande familjen: familjetidskriften i Sverige 1850-1880* (Stockholm: Nordiska museets handlingar, 1980).

⁶ Minna Ahokas, "Works of Enlightenment Philosophy in Finnish Cities During the 1700s" in *The Emergence of Finnish Book and Reading Culture in the 1700s*, edited by Cecilia af Forselles and Tuuja Laine (Helsingfors: Finnish Literature Society, 2011).

The Swedish scholar Anita Ankarcrona used auction protocols from the Stockholm Book Auction Room from the late eighteenth century to study reading audiences.⁷ She was able to follow the entire transaction, from the seller of the book, to the buyer, title of the book and price. Using the preserved sources she could pinpoint the price level of books sold, the proportion theology, history, fiction and the social stratification of the customers. Another Swedish scholar, Margareta Björkman studied commercial lending libraries in Stockholm during the same time, the late eighteenth century.⁸ Björkman used preserved library catalogues and analysed the book stock in the libraries according to genre, authorship etc. By using a printed members' directory from one of the libraries, she was also able to outline the social segmentation of the library. The clientele belonged to society's elites, although there were a handful of library customers belonging to the middle classes.

Other scholars, for example the Swedes Åke Åberg⁹ and Eva Helen Ulvros,¹⁰ have used diaries and preserved correspondence to get a close look at what and how a number of dedicated readers read during the nineteenth century. Åberg has also conducted large-scale interview projects with readers who grew up in the early twentieth century to outline reading experiences and the relation to literature among common readers.

One of the most well known studies using estate inventories has been conducted by the Norwegian scholar Jostein Fet, who studied what Norwegian peasants read before 1840.¹¹ His study encompasses thousands of estate inventories, which in turn list thousands of books. Unlike many other scholars, Jostein Fet makes inter-Scandinavian comparisons when it comes to literacy rates, book production, and he compares his findings of books in estate inventories with similar Swedish and Danish studies, notably Arne Carlsson's study on estate inventories in Bohuslän in western Sweden and Fritz Heide's study on estate inventories in Zeeland in Denmark. On the basis of the estate inventories, Fet was able to detect regional as well as international trends in terms of genres, authors, and secularisation processes. There are a few other examples of scholars taking on trans-national perspectives in a Nordic context. The Finnish scholar Tuija Laine and the Danish scholars Charlotte Appel and Morten Fink-Jensen have all published anthologies that outline general trends when it comes to book culture in the Nordic countries.¹²

⁷ Anita Ankarcrona, *Bud på böcker: bokauktioner i Stockholm 1782-1801: traditionen - böckerna - publiken* (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 1989).

⁸ Margareta Björkman, *Läsarnas nöje: kommersiella lånbibliotek i Stockholm 1783-1809* (Uppsala: Skrifter utgivna av Avdelningen för litteratursociologi vid Litteraturvetenskapliga institutionen i Uppsala, 1992).

⁹ Åke Åberg, *Västerås mellan Kellgren och Onkel Adam: studier i provinsens litterära villkor och system* (Södertälje: Västerås kulturnämnds skriftserie, 1987).

¹⁰ Eva Helen Ulvros, *Fruar och mamseller: kvinnor inom sydsvensk borgerlighet 1790-1870* (Lund: Historiska media, 1996).

¹¹ Jostein Fet, *Lesande bønder: litterær kultur i norske allmugesamfunn før 1840* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1995).

¹² *The Emergence of Finnish Book and Reading Culture in the 1700s*, edited by Cecilia af Forselles and Tuija Laine (Helsingfors: Finnish Literature Society, 2011); *Religious Reading in the Lutheran North: studies in early modern Scandinavian book culture*, edited by Charlotte Appel and Morten Fink-Jensen (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011).

The local perspective turned global: “glocal” readerships

In terms of geographical perspectives, most studies of readership have taken on national or regional perspectives. This, I should point out, includes my own research, which chiefly focuses on regional Swedish conditions.

In a review of Åke Åberg's dissertation, the Swedish literary sociologist Bo Bennich-Björkman criticised Åberg's treatment of regional perspectives. Åberg's dissertation focused on literary culture in Västerås, a city west of Stockholm. Bennich-Björkman points out that it is a highly commendable study, and it takes into account a wealth of different kinds of sources and provides detailed information on the book market and reading cultures during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In his study, Åberg argues that he can detect trends in terms of changing literary preferences and literary production and style, which he claims emerge as a regional phenomenon, to some extent independent of the literary culture in for example Stockholm. In his critique, Bo Bennich-Björkman points out that the trends that Åberg refers to also can be found in corresponding literary environments in Stockholm and other places. Bennich-Björkman argues that we need to think in terms of fields of influence, and that we should be careful not to label local literary paradigm shifts as being independent of the larger socio-economic, political and religious movements taking place at the same time.¹³

It should be pointed out that Bennich-Björkman's critique was not severe. Åberg's study is a highly innovative and thorough piece of work that provides in-depth knowledge on literary culture at a given place and time. A similar study, of equal scientific value, is Gösta Lext's dissertation on book culture in Gothenburg during the eighteenth century.¹⁴ It is a meticulous study, which takes into account the social composition of Gothenburg's inhabitants, the access to education, the import of goods, the city's book trade and accounts of book ownership according to preserved estate inventories. Both Åberg's and Lext's studies are examples of valuable research which scrutinize local and regional conditions at a given time. They go into issues such as book ownership, literacy rates, and book market developments.

So what can studies such as Åberg's and Lext's tell us in terms of readers and readership, on both a regional and an international level? They make us put into question the benefit of talking in terms of regional or global readers, or local or national readers for that matter. Should we even be limiting ourselves to such frameworks?

It is important to remember that in many ways, the local readers were never merely “local” readers. It would actually be more accurate to use the term “glocal readers,” thereby highlighting the fact that there was a strong connection between the readers and both local and global literary developments and trends. The British historical geographer Miles Ogborn reminds us that the global networks of the book are “local at every point.”¹⁵ Even the most remote literary institutions in the Nordic countries, the smallest bookshop and the most insignificant libraries were dependent on

¹³ Bo Bennich-Björkman, “Åke Åberg: Västerås mellan Kellgren och Onkel Adam” review published in *Samlaren: Tidskrift för svensk litteraturvetenskaplig forskning* (1988).

¹⁴ Gösta Lext, *Bok och samhälle i Göteborg 1720–1809* (Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 1950).

¹⁵ Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Ink in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

networks of publishers and bookshops with international ties. The improved communications and book production techniques during the second half of the nineteenth century ensured a stability and regularity in the mobility of texts with cheaper and swifter access to print.

One striking example is found in the aforementioned study by Ahokas. She has studied auction protocols and estate inventories belonging to Finnish military officers during the Enlightenment, and has shown that these groups of readers read French philosophical works by Rousseau and Voltaire as well as erotic novels, which was more or less exactly what was ready by intellectuals in continental Europe at the very same time, according to Darnton.¹⁶

The Nordic countries were, and are still, largely dependent on the import of literature. For centuries, the groups of readers in the Nordic countries were clinging on to the periphery of Europe and were living far away from the literary centres of the time. Paris, London, Berlin, and Rome, the cultural capitals of Europe, were linguistically and geographically distant. In the era before steam power and the expansion of the railroad, communications were slow and unpredictable. But more than perhaps most other groups of readers in Europe, the readers in the Nordic countries were very much global readers. They imported literature on a great scale; they were quick to translate new books and could thereby access foreign literature soon after they had been published. As Franco Moretti has shown, the Nordic countries during the nineteenth century were, more than almost any other place in Europe, a translation culture.¹⁷ When it comes to the fiction published in the Nordic countries, for example, around two thirds consisted of translations of foreign works, from English, German, and French.

For the general reading public in the Nordic countries, books by foreign authors were just as easy to come by as the writings of the domestic authors. In the 1870s, August Strindberg famously stated that French authors, for example Alphonse Daudet, were talked about in Stockholm as if they were Swedes and he further claimed that Daudet was better known than any of the Swedish writers of the time.¹⁸

Language cultures in the Nordic countries

This brings us to the next point of this lecture: the issue of language. Studies in history of reading in a Nordic context need to take into careful consideration the aspect of language. The well-educated segments of the Nordic populations were accustomed to reading foreign languages. The academic and clerical language of Latin lived on as a *lingua franca* remarkably long in a Nordic context, not least in Finland, and to be able to read first French, later German and finally English was regarded as essential parts of the formal education for the upper classes in the Nordic countries. A number of quite remarkable publishing projects in Sweden highlight how widespread the knowledge of for example French and German was in certain sections of society. The Stockholm-

¹⁶ Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹⁷ Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 1998), 151-158, 174-184.

¹⁸ Henning Hansen, "Buying and Borrowing Books: Book Consumption In Late Nineteenth-Century Sweden," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada/Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada* (54/1-2: Spring-Fall 2016), 121-53.

based publisher Olav Grahn, for example, published an ambitious series entitled *Bibliothèque des auteurs classiques français* (1812-17) in as much as forty-three volumes. The entire series was written in French and targeted a Nordic audience reading French. Another example is the Uppsala-based publisher Emanuel Bruzelius who published *Bibliothek der detuschen Classiker* (1811-21), in altogether seventy-six volumes, all in German. Both these ambitious publishing projects are quite exceptional, but the publishers' decision to take on foreign-language projects of this scale is quite telling of the linguistic ability of the book-buying audiences at the time. As Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish studies of reading societies in libraries during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century have shown, foreign literature generally constituted a substantial share of the book collections of libraries and reading societies at the time. In some cases the book collections consisted almost exclusively of literature in foreign languages.

The audience in the Nordic countries reading foreign literature in the original language consisted exclusively of the elites. These groups of elite readers arguably had much more in common with the groups of elite readers in the neighbouring countries or regions than with the common readers on their own turf, who could neither afford nor understand the foreign-language literature. The readers reading books in foreign languages can be said to belong to more of a trans-national reading community with more of a horizontal sense of collectivism than a vertical one, which is determined by the reader's socio-economic status more than their geographical location.

There are bonds between the Nordic countries that are both complex and strong, and the similarities of the languages have created special relations between the countries' national literatures. Historically, the book market of the Nordic countries have had a lot of co-operation and trans-national exchanges within the Nordic sphere. The book market of the Nordic countries can be said to basically have consisted of two halves, one eastern and one western. The western consisted of the Danish-Norwegian book market and the eastern of the Swedish-Finnish book market. Linguistically there was hardly any difference between written Danish and Norwegian, and Swedish was for centuries the dominant language of the book in Finland. The co-operation between the Nordic countries was, however, not confined to these two halves. During the nineteenth century, for example, several of the most important publishers and booksellers in Sweden were of Danish origin. They modernised the Swedish book trade as a whole, and for some of them, the ties to colleagues in Denmark were arguably of greater importance than to those in their new home country.

The nineteenth century was the era of the pan-Scandinavian movement, and attempts were made to strengthen the bonds between the Nordic countries even further, on a political level as well as a cultural level. The nineteenth century was also the heyday of some of the greatest Nordic authorships. Authors such as the Dane Hans Christian Andersen, the Swede Esaias Tegnér, the Norwegians Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe and the Finns Johan Ludvig Runeberg and Zacharias Topelius became popular throughout the Nordic countries and were read by readers from the entire social spectrum. In many cases, however, they were read in translation.

One of the cultural aims of the pan-Scandinavian movement was that translations between the Nordic countries was unnecessary and should be discouraged. This was put into effect later on, during the literary movement of the Modern Breakthrough, which permeated the literary field in the Nordic countries during the late nineteenth century. Henrik Ibsen, for one, opposed translation of his books to other Nordic languages, and his Swedish readers were therefore forced to read his books in the original Norwegian. To some extent, these political linguistic efforts were successful.

As the literary sociologists Sven Møller Kristensen and Lars Furuland have pointed out, readers throughout the Nordic countries read Ibsen's and other authors' books in the same language, at the same time. When a new book by Ibsen came on the market, it was in fact launched simultaneously in the Nordic countries in order to keep eager readers content, regardless of distance. However, not everyone was able to read the neighbouring languages, and this especially concerns readers with only basic education. It should be added that the mutual understanding of the neighbouring languages in the Nordic countries in historic times has, so far, been insufficiently studied.

On a slightly different note, the mutual understanding of the neighbouring languages in the Nordic countries has implications for the scholarly field of today. Only a minority of the studies on the history of reading published in the past few decades, for example, have been written in English, and a lot of the Nordic scholarship can thereby only attain a Nordic readership. With that said, a lot of the Finnish scholarship can only be read by Finns.

Future research: methodological aspects

In my own research I have leaned more on a regional perspective than a global. But the readers I have encountered in my own research are very much what we can call "glocal readers." When surveying the scholarly field of history of reading, it strikes me how easily one may dismiss historical studies on the basis of their limited scope. But the quality of a historical study cannot be measured simply by the size of its geographical or temporal scope. The same goes for the choice of method and source material. As a general rule, getting a closer look at an individual reader, at the level of detail where we can study not only what but how they read, often comes at a certain price. The number of different readers portrayed in studies focusing on issues such as reading experiences, will be limited. In other studies, it is the other way around. We can discern the general trends in terms of reading on something of a macro perspective, but we then tend to lose sight of the individual readers. We gain something, but we also lose something.

It is my firm belief that national, regional or even local studies possess the ability to highlight the global tendencies. They add another piece to the puzzle, so to speak, and it is really only when we have these in-depth regional studies that we can make out the international patterns as well as the local variations of book consumption and history of reading.

Some literary trends that I have seen in my own research can without doubt be said to be of a global nature. The interest in light fiction during the late nineteenth century can be seen almost everywhere. According to library statistics collected by Eduard Reyer, the loans of fiction accounted for as much as 70 or 80 per cent of the loans from public libraries in Boston, in Manchester, and in Vienna. And I have found the same tendencies in a small rural library in southern Sweden. Another example is the craze for "robber novels" which spread across Europe in translations and national adaptations. A third example are the hugely popular books by British authors Wilkie Collins and George Reynolds who were read in public libraries in India at the same time as they were borrowed from commercial lending libraries in Sweden.¹⁹ In many cases, the people reading these books probably had no idea of the nationality of the author of the book they were reading at the moment, or even what language or time it

¹⁹ *The World Novel in English to 1950* edited by Ralph Crane, Jane Stafford and Mark Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

was originally written in. These few examples highlight the fact that the readers consuming these books were partaking in an international literature with global horizons.

The past decades have seen a rising interest in the history of reading, and a widespread desire to add a consumer perspective on, for example, history of literature. Scholars such as the literary sociologist Gunnar Hansson have highlighted the importance of having a consumer perspective when writing literary history. In his own work, Hansson uses print figures for certain authors and compares these to the amount of attention the same authors have been given in reference literature.²⁰ But to rely merely on print figures is not enough. There were books that were printed in vast numbers of copies and given away for free, for example, but that does not mean that they were actually read. Sometimes it was the other way around. Some books printed in quite limited print runs could be borrowed over and over again in libraries. Putting too much weight on print figures when it comes to assessing the size of the readership or the actual popularity of a certain work or authorship can therefore be deceptive.

My own study of readers and reading in Sweden is not groundbreaking in terms of methodology. Numerous studies based on library borrowing records have for example been published over the years. But it is probably one of the first studies, at least in the Nordic countries, which attempts to take on something of a comparative history of reading. In order to perform the study it has been key to identify a large body of readers, and to be able to go into detail as well as to grasp the general patterns of consumption.

When it comes to studies within the history of reading that are based on quantitative data, for example borrowing statistics from libraries, it is of vital importance to be able to identify the readers. This can be done by linking and cross-referencing the findings to censuses or parish records and to other available source material. Without identifying at least some of the readers, and assessing the social context in which they lived and read, quantitative studies such as these will not show their full potential and may well turn into just lists of numbers where the readers themselves remain anonymous and distant. But in the cases where we have access to large bodies of data, covering thousands of examples of book consumption, and are able to identify the people buying or borrowing the books, we can get the best out of both worlds. We are then able to study the history of reading on both a macro and a micro level, say the literary preferences of individual, identified readers as well as the overall literary trends.

In my research I have been using archives from a number of institutions that together served readers from the entire social spectrum during the late nineteenth century. Similar studies can hardly be undertaken for earlier periods, since it was only after the establishment of public libraries that all sections of society could get affordable and regular access to books. Most studies in the history of reading in a Nordic context focusing on earlier periods are only able to cover the reading of the elite groups in society, consisting chiefly of officials, noblemen, and the clergy. In general, the reading of the great mass of the population, who were often literate, but who did not have regular access to books, are often excluded entirely from these studies. It should be pointed out that there are exceptions. Scholars such as Charlotte Appel²¹ and Henrik

²⁰ Gunnar Hansson, *Den möjliga litteraturhistorien* (Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag, 1995)

²¹ Charlotte Appel, *Læsning og bogmarked i 1600-tallets Danmark* (København: Museum Tusulanums forlag, 2001).

Horstbøll²² have studied reading in Denmark during the seventeenth century, primarily the folk tales and pedagogic literature, but it remains extremely difficult to get close to the individual common readers.

During my years as a PhD student I have attended numerous conferences around the world, and presented findings from my studies. On several occasions, people have approached me and pointed out that the sources I have used must be uncommonly rare, if not entirely unique. But over the years, I have also encountered a few - not many, that is for sure - but a handful that have told me that they use similar sources, and we have been able to discuss similar findings and methodological issues. Among these are Maxine Branagh who has studied children's reading in Scotland during the long eighteenth century, Christina Lupton, who stumbled upon borrowers' records from a library in England, and Maria Purtoft, who has found sales records from Norway's largest bookshop, as well as borrowers' records from a library in southeastern Norway. Similar sources can also be found in the United States, India, and I am sure in a great number of other places.

By applying statistical analysis on sources such as these and pairing them with censuses and other public records, we are able to extract information that lends itself to comparisons between different regions and countries.

I imagine that one or two scholars have come across sources of this nature but have been hesitant to dive into them, and maybe rightly so. And to those who would venture into such a study I have to give a fair word of warning. Adding a solid reception perspective on a literary study or a historical narrative is not quickly or easily done. It takes a lot of hard and arduous work. But such a study, in the cases where it is possible to conduct it, may be very rewarding.

Studies of this nature can further our knowledge on issues such as the actual reception of individual authors; the history of ideas; the public's interest in certain ideas; popular culture; and can highlight the discrepancy between access and actual consumption of literature. Such studies may add another dimension to literary studies but may also help to re-think the entire focus of the studies. Are we for example missing out certain topics or literary fields or authorships entirely? These studies may also allow us to study the history of reading through parameters such as class, gender and geographical location and may further help to explain the survival or success of certain ideas and of authorships that are read or studied today.

So who may benefit more directly from these kinds of studies? Some projects, for example studies on a certain author, may benefit directly from them. There is a lot of educated guesswork taking place when it comes to calculating the popularity of certain authors, the social composition of the audience consuming culture and so forth. Studies such as the ones I have proposed may give actual numbers and provide something resembling hard evidence. I have already been able to assist a couple of colleagues in their studies. I was for example able to assist a colleague working on Scandinavian encyclopaedias by providing her with a list of customers buying these works from a bookshop in Gothenburg, thereby adding a missing piece of the puzzle, the issue of reception. I helped another colleague working on degeneration theory in the Scandinavian cultural debate during the 1880s by comparing the sales figures of the philosophers and authors August Bebel and Max Nordau. In such examples, the local or regional study can be used to add an international dimension to another study.

²² Henrik Horstbøll, *Menigmands medie: det folkelige bogtryk i Danmark 1500-1840: en kulturhistorisk undersøgelse* (København: Det Kongelige Bibliotek, 1999).

Closing remarks

What I have been talking about here today is the relevance and value of trans-national and regional research projects focusing on the history of reading. Both kinds of projects are important if we want to study readers, not least the regional ones, since they allow a closer look. I am arguing that there is not really such a thing as a global or a regional reader. The book market was international, not least in the Nordic countries, which were dependent on translations and foreign books in the original language. Rather than being global or local, the readers were “glocal,” and their socio-economic status and level of education did more to define them as readers, than where they happened to live.

What I am advocating when it comes to future research is firstly the use and study of preserved records that can provide information on what people from all social layers read, on both a micro and a macro level. The findings from such sources should be linked to censuses and other public records. Secondly, I am suggesting that the findings from such case studies should be compared to similar studies on a regional, national and even global base, in order to grasp the general patterns of consumption. Relevant sources such as borrowing or sales’ records from libraries or bookshops can be found in many places. They are not all from the same period or of the same nature or size, but they contain information of similar kind.

As I have mentioned, we are already aware of some global tendencies when it comes to book consumption. The widespread interest in fiction, the popularity of certain authors, books and so forth. But we have not come very far when it comes to comparing the findings from these studies. It is tempting to put together the findings from these archives and make international comparisons, thereby taking it to the next level. What other trends can we detect in terms of book consumption? Can we categorise literary preferences according to global or regional trends?

Thank you.